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DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

Pajtók Ágnes

“She knew the wayes to win good will”

Reading Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* From a Gender

Point Of View

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I. Introduction

As Camilla Paglia proclaimed, “[a]t the moment *The Faerie Queene* is a great beached whale, marooned on the desert shores of English departments.”¹ And indeed, *The Faerie Queene* is encompassed with the atmosphere of grimness, tediousness, or mere indifference. Even a glimpse at the thick volume discourages one. It is not something one feels that could be a manageable read. Short plot summaries do not invite one to read the romance, since these usually give a chaotic account of names and events. The amount of characters and plot lines mentioned in these summaries provide the reader with the feeling that one could never cope with such a forbidding work. However, if one took the course of action to plunge into the world of *The Faerie Queene*, a mysterious and intriguing poetic realm can be found, which is inhabited by intriguing characters of great variety. From the abundance of figures the romance presents, this dissertation is going to focus on female personae to reveal their peculiarities and observe the way they conform to the roles that were assigned to them.

In *The Faerie Queene* all central females who espouse any of the romance’s virtues, are magnificent, noble ladies of impeccable conduct, and worthy of royal marriage or possessing self-contained power. At the other end of the moral continuum reside those malign temptresses who aim at subverting the orderliness of the fairy world. This group constitute the arch enemies of the various heroes and heroines, whose duty it is to maintain lawfulness. Meanwhile, some minor characters that do not bear the didactic pressure of setting examples of proper behaviour, are able to display more colourful variants of female

¹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae, Art and Decadence From Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin Group, 1990), 170.

stories. As these figures are neither ideological cornerstones of the romance, nor overtly disruptive, they have a more spacious scope regarding their actions. This latter group of women constitute an intriguing node: through their unconventional and individualistic actions, and due to the narrator's lenience towards their disobedience, they quietly undermine the romance's meticulously constructed world, in which ideal women are chaste, silent and obedient. Owing to their mediating position of filling the gap between the two extremes of right and wrong, and because of the lack of terminology describing them as a group, in this dissertation they are going to be referred to as middle women.

To prove the assumptions about the aforementioned three distinct groups of Spenserian women, a thorough analysis of the romance is needed. The second chapter (*Context*) is going to concentrate on delineating the background of the romance, firstly, by considering the history of its reception with a special outlook on female responses; secondly, by reflecting on the uniqueness of the Elizabethan era and its imprints on Spenser. This part of the introduction should be useful for the third chapter, which will analyse the appearance of women in *The Faerie Queene*. The last part of the introduction is going to focus on conduct books and draw a picture of sixteenth century behavioural patterns. This outlook will serve as a frame of reference to the fourth chapter, which investigates female sexual behaviour. By analysing the distinctive appearances and behaviour of women in *The Faerie Queene*, the aim is to indicate the emergence of a usually ignored group, the middle women. However, to be able to grasp the uniqueness of these women, one should also pay heed to the contrasting groups of chaste and sinful women.

These distinct groups can be discerned most clearly by concentrating on the text itself. Hence, after providing a context, the two main chapters of *Appearance* and *Behaviour* are going to be based on a close reading of the romance, whose poetic richness

offers an endless source of literary analysis.

The Faerie Queene is not going to be handled as a historical work representing and allegorising events in the court of Elizabeth I, but as a literary piece. Although we could argue that Spenser was inspired by courtly intrigue, the outcome of this train of thought is necessarily speculative. We can use historical details to sketch the context and age of the romance, but actual events do not have to filter into the analysis. Even if Duessa's trial is an allegory for the trial of Mary Queen of Scots,² what is intriguing is not what the author might have had in mind when writing the romance, but the outcome, which is a piece of art, where uniquely sensuous images, detailed descriptions and intriguing episodes are conjured more persuasively than narrative.³

The evocative nature of Spenser's text has also been captured by Angus Fletcher, who directed attention to a creative reading of Spenser. "The excitement of reading Spenser, is so to speak ours, not Spenser's. We bring it to the work; the work does not, like a mimetic work, present us with a series of events capable in their autonomy of exciting our attention and sympathy."⁴ The romance heavily relies on our senses and our private, personal responses. Instead of a logical plot, a reading of *The Faerie Queene* evokes associations, which enrich the text with a broad range of connotations.

When a story has "a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal meaning"⁵ we can talk about this in terms of allegory. Yet, to understand a literary piece, and be capable of interpreting it, one has to share a common cultural background with the author, and fully understand the age and its people when the given work was written.

² Andrew Hadfield, "Spenser and the Death of the Queen," in *Imagining Death in Spenser and Milton*, ed. Jane Bellamy et al. (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003), 39.

³ The term *narrative* is used in the sense as given in the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick: "a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events"

⁴ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory, The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1964), 273.

⁵ Chris Baldick, *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.

Cultural diversity and wide time gaps between the creation and the reception do not facilitate a unified allegorical comprehension. Although some archetypal patterns of understanding exist, with our varied cultural background, the scope of associations evoked by a renaissance literary piece is extremely wide.

Analysing *The Faerie Queene* from an allegorical point of view often causes interpretive problems and confusion, as to whether to decipher the romance on a moral, mythological or historical level, and how to entangle the mixture of genres the allegory as a form offers.⁶ The impetus for a frequent allegorical approach to *The Faerie Queene* lies in Spenser's private letter to Raleigh, which is often added before the romance as if it were a foreword to it. In this letter, Spenser calls his work "a continued Allegory,"⁷ hence *The Faerie Queene* became the epitome of English allegorical poetry. Yet, as Kenneth Borris presumes, "even *The Faerie Queene* has been assimilated into the ostensible decline of allegory, for many have declared that, especially in the last completed Book VI, Spenser himself came to abandon the mode."⁸ Consequently, instead of analysing and speculating which character is allegorical to what extent, it would be more apt to rely on Angus Fletcher's inspiring and liberating view about figures with allegorical potential. "If we were to meet an allegorical character in real life, we would say of him that he was obsessed with only one idea, or that he had an absolutely one-track mind, or that his life was patterned according to absolutely rigid habits from which he never allowed himself to vary."⁹ The assumption is that Spenser might have drawn his characters as allegories, yet

⁶ Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature, An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 192: "For allegory is quite as conductive as satire to mixture of genres. It can use almost any external structure or "outside" allegorically, making it the husk or sense of an inner matiere - and modifying it generically in the process."

⁷ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche (London: Penguin Classics, 1987), 15.

⁸ Kenneth Borris, *Allegory and Epic in English Renaissance Literature- Heroic form in Sidney, Spenser and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.

⁹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 40

this dissertation is not going to handle them as such, and instead of probing the sources of these characters, they are going to be analysed with their behaviour in mind.

The focus of character analysis is going to be on women. When discussing gender, the term is going to be used in the same vein as in Camille Paglia's oeuvre, that is, one's hormonal identity.¹⁰ The reason for identifying gender with femininity¹¹ lies in renaissance cultural history when the position of a woman was still as the other. Being male was the basic category, and being female was different, and marked. Analysing the subject of women should highlight the idiosyncrasies of marginal personae.

There is an abundance of material at our disposal about how to be a good woman, (daughter, wife, mother), whereas not many of these publications regulate male private life in depth. It seems that to be a befitting woman requires effort, while to be a proper man comes naturally. Men were endowed with a significantly wider scope of action than women, hence, the former violated rules less often than the latter. The clear and explicit guidelines concerning female ways of living facilitate our identification of female transgression.

Camille Paglia's views about the reasons for female suppression prove to be riveting when analysing *The Faerie Queene*. She claims that "[f]eminism has been simplistic in arguing that female archetypes were politically motivated falsehoods by men. The historical repugnance to woman has a rational basis: disgust is reason's proper

¹⁰ cf. Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 27 ("Let us abandon the pretense of sexual sameness and admit the terrible duality of gender. Male sex is quest romance, exploration and speculation. Promiscuity in men may cheapen love but sharpen thought. Promiscuity in women is illness, a leakage of identity."), 57 ("The Venus of Willendorf, blind, tongueless, brainless, armless, knock-kneed, seems to be a depressing model of gender. Yet woman is depressed, pressed down, by earth's gravitation, calling us back to her bosom."), 91 ("The *hygra physis* is the mature female body, which I declare a prison of gender. Female experience is submerged in the world of fluids, dramatically demonstrated in menstruation, childbirth, and lactation.")

¹¹ Elaine Showalter, ed., *Speaking of Gender*, (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 4.

response to the grossness of procreative nature.”¹² And indeed, *The Faerie Queene* is an epitome of this clash of the sexes. In the poem, men fight against women, and strive to overpower them, but the motive behind this urge is to destroy their alluring, erotic power. Sexual temptation belongs to the realm of instincts, hence scarily despicable for reasonable men. Female bodies need to be under control, almost invisible, their earthly traits carefully hidden. Paglia argues that harnessing female procreative energies is not necessarily, and not exclusively erroneous. “Repression is an evolutionary adaptation permitting us to function under the burden of our expanded consciousness.”¹³ Adapting this idea to a reading of the romance, opens up an examination of female limitation, and how females operate in this system, whether they respond with acceptance, or rebellion, and whether the emergence of the independent woman is possible under these circumstances.

¹² Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 12

¹³ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 16

II. Context

i. The most important stages of Spenser's reception – with an outlook on female responses

Although Spenser never got royal recognition, he was lauded and praised by his fellow writers and poets. Among others, Sidney, Raleigh and Nashe¹⁴ acknowledged his talent. Initially his *Shepherd's Calendar* was more appreciated, and it was even incorporated into Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*. However, at this stage the work was more popular than its author, whose name was yet to be remembered: "For Eglogue and pastorall Poesie, Sir *Philip Sydney* and Maister *Challenger*, and that other Gentleman who wrote the late *shepherd's Calendar*."¹⁵

The popular appreciation of *The Faerie Queene* was slower in coming. At its time it was applauded by an exclusive group of upper-class connoisseurs. As the dedicatory sonnets reveal, even at the time of its creation *The Faerie Queene* relied on a female readership, and most notably on the addressee's, Elizabeth I's attention. Apart from Elizabeth I, other ladies were on the author's mind as potential readers as well. From the

¹⁴ Sidney notes in his *Defence of Poesy*: "*The Shepherd's Calendar* hath much poetry in his eclogues, indeed worthy of reading." see Sir Philip Sidney, *A selection of his finest poems*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 134; Sir Walter Raleigh wrote two commendatory verses to *The Faerie Queene*, see Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 19; Thomas Nashe, *Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), vol III. 323.

¹⁵ R.M. Cummings, *Spenser, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 62.

seventeen dedicatory verses,¹⁶ three address women, and although they are positioned at the very end of the series of sonnets, they should not be ignored. “To the Right Honourable and Most Vertuous Lady, the Countesse of Penbroke” is a rather warm tribute to Sir Philip Sidney, with a brief, though favourable, mention of his sister: “His goodly image liuing euermore, / In the diuine resemblance of your face.” (lines 9-10) In the sonnet to Lady Carey, the rhetoric of self-deprecation is employed: to create a work worthy of her one “doth need a golden quill, /and siluer leaues” not merely a “humble present of good will” (line 12). The tone here is playfully flattering, in opposition to the male dedicatees’ sonnets, where solemn veneration prevails. “Spenser’s tone of general banter may reflect touches of personal affection, but it also reflects a lack of ‘serious’ power and status in Spenser’s feminine addressee.”¹⁷ Later, the same tone can be discovered in the dedicatory sonnet to the Ladies in the court. Miller claims that here Spenser “registers their lower status partly in the anonymity of its collective address.”¹⁸ Despite the unfavourable place and the anonymity, this sonnet indicates something vital concerning the relationship between *The Faerie Queene* and women: namely, that Spenser must have had a fairly substantial female readership in mind. Although, unfortunately, there is hardly any explicit evidence of contemporary female interest,¹⁹ the abundance of “[e]xcerpts from *The Faerie Queene* figured in personal commonplace books”²⁰ insinuates that the romance was not unpopular among women. Similarly, in the following decades, only indirect, prohibiting comments suggest there was a female readership for *The Faerie Queene*: for in the

¹⁶ About the controversy about the dedicatory sonnets see Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 72; A. C. Hamilton ed., *Spenser Encyclopedia*, (Toronto:University of Toronto Press, 1997), 259, 292.

¹⁷ David Lee Miller, *The Poem’s Two Bodies: The Poetics of the 1590 Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 60.

¹⁸ Miller, *Two Bodies*, 54.

¹⁹ Caroline McManus, *Spenser’s Faerie Queen and the Reading of Women* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 53: “The only extant annotations of *The Faerie Queene* by a woman seem to be the minimal ones of Lady Raleigh in the edition given to her son, Carew Raleigh. (...) Lady Raleigh annotated Raleigh’s two commendatory verses as “both thes of your father’s making”.

²⁰ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 53.

seventeenth century women were discouraged to indulge themselves in romances. “Spencers and Daniels Sonets do not view, / Though they are good, they are not for you. / From feigned Histories refrain thy sight, / Scare one is there but is an amorous Knight,”²¹ admonishes Sir Aston Cockayne in 1658. This attitude is in accordance with what Mary Ellen Lamb writes about the expected differences between male and female reading materials. She notices about Sidney’s epic that “when men were represented as reading Sidney’s *Arcadia*, it was usually described as a work replete with political or moral precepts; when read by women, however, it was represented as dangerously or titillatingly sexual.”²² Spenser’s works were thus claimed to be suitable for men, however, apart from the extraordinarily meticulous and scholarly analysis of Sir Kenelm Digby,²³ it was not until the twentieth century Spenser received deep appreciation from males. Although Milton held favourable opinion (“our sage and serious poet *Spencer*, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher then *Scotus* or *Aquinas*,”²⁴) his *Paradise Lost* did the most damage in the reception of Spenser: it involuntarily eclipsed *The Faerie Queene*. The reason is that “*Paradise Lost* was not the perfect neo-classical poem, but it was a closer approximation to it than was the *Faerie Queene*.”²⁵ Thus, being judged by the neoclassical standards of the Restoration, Milton was handled both as poetically and morally superior. Hume writes in his *Notes on Paradise Lost* “Now if we compare the foregoing Description of this blissful Bower, with one of a Poet our Country-man, and deservedly famous in his time, we shall find the difference of their Genius to be great as that of their Language.”²⁶ Pope’s opinion is similarly ambiguous: “Spenser has ever been a favourite poet to me; he

²¹ Cummings, *Spenser*, 195.

²² Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 8.

²³ Cummings, *Spenser*, 148.

²⁴ John Milton, *Aeopagitica, An unabridged facsimile of the edition published in 1898 by AlexMurray & Son* (London: Elibron Classics, 2006), 46.

²⁵ Cummings, *Spenser*, 19.

²⁶ Cummings, *Spenser*, 227.

is like a mistress, whose faults we see, but love her with them all.”²⁷

Literary figures in the nineteenth century almost exclusively interpreted Spenser as the epitome of pure poetry. Although these remarks were mostly positive, a mild voice of criticism could be felt toward the occasionally nauseating sweetness of the romance. This opinion can be grasped in Coleridge’s *Lecture on Spenser* (delivered in 1818, published 1836).

As characteristic of Spenser, I would call your particular attention in the first place to the indescribable sweetness and fluent projection of his verse, very clearly distinguishable from the deeper and more inwoven harmonies of Shakespeare and Milton.”²⁸ And a slightly critical expression of Spenser’s mildness: “in Spenser, indeed, we trace a mind constitutionally tender, delicate, and (...) I had almost said *effeminate*.”²⁹

Hazlitt’s *Lecture On Chaucer and Spenser* also emphasises the latter’s softness and gentleness, in addition to which he sensitively captures the essence of *The Faerie Queene*: he reads it as a sensuous poem, which is able to conjure an entire world.

Spenser’s poetry is all fairy-land. (...) In Spenser, we wander in another world, among ideal beings. The poet takes and lays us in the lap of a lovelier nature, by the sound of softer streams, among greener hills and fairer valleys. He paints nature, not as we find it, but as we expected to find it.³⁰

The chapter on Spenser in Leigh Hunt’s *Imagination and Fancy* from 1844, also concentrates on beauty. “Spenser’s great characteristic is poetic luxury. If you go to him for a story, you will be disappointed; (...) But if you love poetry well enough to enjoy it for its own sake, let no evil reports of his ‘allegory’ deter you from his acquaintance, for great

²⁷ Cummings, *Spenser*, 20

²⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1955), 547.

²⁹ Coleridge, *Coleridge*, 548

³⁰ Edmund Spenser, *Spenser Selections With Essays by Hazlitt, Coleridge and Leigh Hunt*, with an introduction and notes by W.L. Renwick (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 1.

will be your loss.”³¹

Wordsworth’s opinion cannot be accounted for in critical remarks, but his appreciation can be gleaned from a number of direct references in his poems, for instance in *The Prelude*: “Sweet Spenser, moving through his clouded heaven/ With the moon’s beauty and the moon’s soft pace, /I called him Brother, Englishman, and Friend!” iii. 280-83.³²

Adding a personal touch to Wordsworth’s acquaintance with Spenser, W.J.B. Owen refers to Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal in showing that William was encouraged by his sister to read *The Faerie Queene*. It is clear from her journal that she acquainted William with *The Faerie Queene*: “she put him to sleep by reading Spenser to him in March 1802; she read the first canto in of *The Faerie Queene* to him in June 1802; and he read Spenser himself in July 1802.”³³

It could be argued that *The Faerie Queene* always appealed to female readers. Rewritten, tamed versions became increasingly popular among women: “From 1779 to the present, over 30 English language adaptations of *The Faerie Queene* have been published for children and young adults”³⁴ The most notable of these are Lucy Peacock’s *The Adventure of the Six Princesses of Babylon, in Their Travels to the Temple of Virtue* (London 1785), Eliza W. Bradburn’s *Legend’s from Spenser’s Fairy Queen, for Children* (London 1829), Mrs Elizabeth Peaboy’s aptly titled *Holiness, or The Legend of St. George: A Tale from Spencer’s Faerie Queene, By a Mother* (Boston 1836), and Sophia M. Maclehose’s *Tales from Spenser Chosen from The Faerie Queene* (Glasgow 1889). This latter became a best-seller of its time: it was re-edited in 1890 and 1892, then again in 1893

³¹ Spenser, *Spenser Selections*, 15

³² William Wordsworth, *The Collected Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Antonia Till, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), 653, 102-106.

³³ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 735.

³⁴ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 298.

and 1894 as part of the Macmillan School Library series, and finally in 1905 for a different Macmillan series.³⁵

Yet, Spenser-appreciation was not limited to the female populace. The noted poetess, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was also an advocate of Spenser. As Kay R. Moser observes, “references to Spenser in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s letters and notebooks begin in her 21st year and continue throughout her life, indicating that her knowledge of his works, especially *The Faerie Queene*, was comprehensive, acquired early, and easily recalled.”³⁶ In her poem, *A Vision of Poets*, she includes Spenser in her list of honoured poets: “And Spenser drooped his dreaming head (...) On Ariosto’s, till they ran / Their curls into one.”³⁷ In her rhymed romance, *Lady Geraldine’s Courtship*, Barrett Browning gives her hero the task of wooing his beloved Geraldine by reading her “the pastoral parts of Spenser, /or the subtle interflowings /Found in Petrarch’s sonnets.”³⁸ Her references to Spenser naturally followed on from her high opinion of his work, stated most fully in her anonymous review of an anthology called *The Book of the Poets* written in 1842. Here she describes *The Faerie Queene* as an allegory, which “enchants us away from its own purposes.” For the poetess, Barrett Browning, the literal, poetic weight of the romance means more than the hidden and speculative allegorical layers. “Una is Una to us; and Sans Foy is a traitor, and Errour is an ‘ugly monster,’ with a ‘tayle;’ and we thank nobody in the world, not even Spenser, for trying to prove otherwise. Do we dispraise an allegorical poem by throwing off its allegory?”³⁹ In her perceptive comparison of Chaucer and Spenser, Elizabeth Barrett Browning declares that “Chaucer has a cheerful humanity: Spenser, a cheerful ideality. One rejoices walking on the sunny side of the street: the other

³⁵ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 289-291.

³⁶ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 116.

³⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: Crowell & Co., 1973), vol.ii. 323.

³⁸ Barrett Browning, *Complete Works*, vol. ii. 292.

³⁹ Barrett Browning, *Complete Works*, vol. vi 262.

out of the street in a way of his own, kept green by a blessed vision.”⁴⁰

Virginia Woolf also approached the romance with similar sensitivity. As Barrett Browning was fascinated by the poetry of *The Faerie Queene*, Virginia Woolf became intrigued by the curiously interwoven nature of allegory. “The mind has many layers, and the greater the poem the more of these are roused and brought into action.”⁴¹ Woolf tangibly grasps the magical and transcendental ambience of the Spenserian world: the words' great “power of suggestion”, and their “meaning which comes from their being parts of a whole design.”⁴²

At the dawn of the twentieth century the emerging discipline of literary criticism was not favourable towards Spenser. From the most influential ones, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis dismissed *The Faerie Queene* as flawed.⁴³ Finally Spenser's rehabilitation was accomplished by C.S. Lewis in his *Allegory of Love* in 1936. He discovered Spenser's popular register: “What lies next beneath the surface in Spenser’s poem is the world of popular imagination: almost, a popular mythology.”⁴⁴

Following on from Lewis’s positive stance, Spenser gradually re-claimed his place in a virtual Parthenon, and by the 1960s became the central subject of great literary critics, such as Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode, G. Wilson Knight and Rosemond Tuve, analysing the Spenser oeuvre from distinct points of views. Despite Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* being a theoretical work, in the prefatory statements the reader is informed that originally it was intended to be a set of essays on Spenser, from which it diverted towards a

⁴⁰ Barrett Browning, *Complete Works*, vol. vi. 261.

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1966-67), vol. i. 14.

⁴² Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol.i. 18.

⁴³ Paul Alpers, ed. *Edmund Spenser*, Penguin critical anthologies, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 179.

⁴⁴ Clive Staples Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 312.

more abstract direction.⁴⁵ Rosemond Tuve concentrates on the medieval roots of the poem, the allegorical figures and their origin in the common cultural consciousness. Frank Kermode places *The Faerie Queene* into the broad context of world literature, and goes so far in literary time as to draw parallels between allegories in the romance and *War and Peace* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. G. Wilson Knight's often critical analysis points out the poem's reliance on pagan lore.⁴⁶

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, female critics showed appreciation towards Spenser. He was one of the first male writers who was found interesting by feminist authors, and was analysed from a female point of view. Hence there is an intriguing abundance of writings by female scholars. The most notable authors being Camille Paglia (1990), Philippa Berry (1989), Mary Ellen Lamb (2006), Joanna Thompson (2001) and Anne Paolucci (2005).⁴⁷ In her famous and infamous book *Sexual Personae* Camille Paglia defines *The Faerie Queene* as highly sexualised piece in which the Dionysian forces, suppressed by Western civilisation, seek their way to overcome Apollonian sterility. Philippa Berry's *Of Chastity and Power* analyses the romance in reflection to Elizabeth, the unmarried queen. The thorough cultural-historical investigations in *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* written by

⁴⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1971), vii: "I (...) began a study of Spenser's Faerie Queene, only to discover that in my beginning was my end. The introduction to Spenser became an introduction to the theory of allegory, and that theory obstinately adhered to a much larger theoretical structure."

⁴⁶ Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Frank Kermode, "Spenser and the Allegorists," in *Proceedings of British Academy*, vol. 48, 1962, 261-279; G. Wilson Knight, "The Spenserian Fluidity", in *Poets of Action*, (London: Methuen, 1967), 3-16.

⁴⁷ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae, Art and Decadence From Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, (London: Penguin Group, 1990); Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power, Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen*, (London: Routledge, 1989); Mary Ellen Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* (London: Routledge, 2006); Joanna Thompson, *The Character of Britomart in Spenser's The Faerie Queene* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001); Anne Paolucci, *The Women in Dante's Divine Comedy and Spenser's The Faerie Queene* (Dover: Griffon House, 2005)

Mary Ellen Lamb seeks for imprints of cultural elements from lower registers in high literature. Britomart, the female knight of Chastity is in the focus of Joanna Thompson's meticulous examination (*The Character of Britomart in Spenser's The Faerie Queene*). And finally, Anne Paolucci's book entitled *The Women in Dante's Divine Comedy and Spenser's The Faerie Queene* is valuable when scrutinising female appearances.

Another publication, which cannot be avoided when indulging into research about Spenser on any level, is the exhaustive compilation of the *Spenser Encyclopedia* edited by A.C. Hamilton with prestigious contributors like Paul Alpers, Kenneth Borris, Patrick Cheney, Katherine Duncan-Jones, Davis Lee Miller, Szőnyi György Endre or Gordon Teskey.

This brief summary intended to direct attention to the extraordinary shift of Spenser and *The Faerie Queene* towards many spheres of literature. During the centuries since the creation of *The Faerie Queene*, it has been read as educational literature, children's rhyme, love story, high literature and academic text.

ii. The myth of Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth I's reign took place between 1553 and 1603, a period that is often divided into two major parts. The monumental juncture, which ultimately brought luck for England is deemed to be the sea battle against the Invincible Spanish Armada. The victory for England was of vital importance: in 1588 England gained confidence and emerged as a novel, maritime power.

Meanwhile, after numerous failing attempts to find a suitable husband for Elizabeth, it became clear that her personal and political power was going to remain intact. No matter whether we consider Elizabeth's virginity a failure in fulfilling her royal duties, or the successful strategies of an intelligent woman, the outcome is the same. On the one hand it triggered insecurity regarding the succession. Summing up the consequences of the recognition that Elizabeth was going to die without a descendant Paglia suggests that "the English foresaw the end of the House of Tudor, a cataclysm possibly paralleled in the extinction of the Danish royal family in *Hamlet*."⁴⁸

On the other hand, Elizabeth's independence resulted in the emergence of a ruler, who was not an ordinary human being anymore, but an unattainable semi-goddess. The unwedded queen thus managed to preserve her centrality in every aspect. Elizabeth was not only at the centre of politics, but also the primary muse of her age. Numerous pieces of art in multiple genres were centred on her majestic and influential figure. "The Virgin Queen multiplied in the shape of engravings, woodcuts, medals, and badges."⁴⁹ As far as her portraits are concerned, Elizabeth demanded full control over them, only youthful, idealised images of her could get official approval. "This so-called 'Mask of Youth' bore

⁴⁸ Camille Paglia "Stay, Illusion: Ambiguity in *Hamlet*," in *Ambiguity in the Western Mind*, ed.: de Paulo et al. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2005), 124.

⁴⁹ John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 432.

no relationship to the ageing queen's true likeness, but, when set against an allegorical overlay, made the perfect image for propaganda purposes."⁵⁰ Katherine Eggert also spotted the queen's awareness of the importance of her portrayals. "The queen throughout her long reign displayed herself to her realm in a theatrical and visually striking fashion; further, she was prone either to use or to disclaim her sex as need be in order to exert her will."⁵¹

During the forty-five years of Elizabeth's reign, numerous myths circulated about her. The different images of Elizabeth (like Astrea, Debora, Diana) became manifest in her pictorial representation. Looking at these portrayals reveals many aspects of the ruler, emphasising her various real or imagined traits.

Elizabeth was reported to be a wise, knowledgeable woman.⁵² Her erudition is already displayed in one of her early portraits, still as a princess, holding a book in her hand (plate 1). Elizabeth comes across as a young lady of sparkling wit, which is underscored by her dark, piercing eyes, and her general inquisitive disposition. The book in her hand is not only a tool, but an integral part of the portrait: as if she had been interrupted the princess keeps one finger in the book to mark the page she was reading.

At other times her political significance was accentuated. In these portraits maps and globes were often incorporated. The most famous of these is the so-called Armada portrait (plate 2) painted around 1588 probably by Gower, the serjeant Painter.⁵³ After the glorious victory over the Spanish Armada, the queen is depicted posing confidently and resting her hand on a globe. The Siena portrait (1580-3, plate 3) is one of the more casual depictions of the queen: usually she appears alone in pictures, however, here she is in a

⁵⁰ Guy, *Tudor England*, 433.

⁵¹ Katherine Eggert, *Showing Like a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 3.

⁵² Guy, *Tudor England*, 251: "...she [Elizabeth] was intelligent and accomplished, speaking French, Italian, and Spanish as well as reading Latin."

⁵³ Roy Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 72.

courtly environment. Yet, the globe at her left still implies her imperial destiny.⁵⁴ In one of her later pictures, the Ditchley portrait (plate 4) from 1592, Elizabeth appears in cosmic size, standing on the map of England. Interestingly in the case of this painting, the queen is not only proportionately sizeable, but “[a]t nearly five feet by seven-and-a-half feet in size, it is the largest surviving image of her.”⁵⁵ A similar cosmic topic is brought to the ultimate level in the popular woodcut (plate 5) from the victorious year of 1588 by John Case.⁵⁶ Here the queen rules not only England, or the world, but the entire pre-Copernican renaissance universe of fixed stars.

After the physical amplification of the queen, it is not surprising that we encounter numerous images displaying her spiritual supremacy. In these images, Elizabeth appears in the role of various goddesses. Her transcendental depictions are numerous, often embedded in obscure mythological references. Also alluding to her imperial self on the frontispiece (plate 6) to a *Hymne* by Georges de la Mothe, a Huguenot refugee,⁵⁷ Elizabeth is seated on the globe between the sun and the moon with rays emanating from her head. The abstract transcendentalism often alternates with explicit innuendo. In the 1579 edition of Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar* Elizabeth appears as Virgo-Venus (plate 7), crowned by the three Graces. In a 1569 painting, often cited as *The Judgement of Paris* (plate 8), she appears in the company of the three primary Hellenic goddesses, Hera, Athene and Aphrodite. Although the title mentions Paris, he is not present in the picture, and it seems that the contest between the goddesses for the apple is over: this time – altering classic mythology – the victory is Elizabeth’s. She holds the apple, which in fact, is an orb, thus suggesting that her qualities exceed the goddesses’.

⁵⁴ Strong, *Portraits*, 66.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1989), 64.

⁵⁶ Strong, *Portraits*, 124.

⁵⁷ Strong, *Portraits*, 102

These images have infiltrated into the common consciousness and thus into literature, and other genres. Elizabeth's literary references include the Deborah, Diana, Cynthia, Astrea, Venus/Virgo, Gloriana, Belphoebe, and "combinations of classical and native mythmaking."⁵⁸ Thomas Dekker already in the sixteenth century aptly recognised and described the diverse nature of the Elizabeth mythology:

Are you then travelling to temple of Eliza
Even to her temple my feeble limbs travelling. Some call her
Pandora: some Gloriana: some Cynthia: some Belphoebe: some Astrea:
all by several names to express several loves: Yet all those names make
but one celestial body, as all those loves meet to create but one soul.⁵⁹

Elizabeth's diversity and position have supplied numerous artists with an unfailing source for portrayal and glorification, and there has been no shortage of artistic attempts in this field. With Dobson we can conclude that "[a]s a subject she has been the career-making of an extraordinary range of writers and performers"⁶⁰ Most of these dedicatory pieces are mere flattery and laudatory clichés, yet even they were in the queen's favour: "she has become more fascinating partly as a result of the sheer number of stories that she has generated."⁶¹ Her era was auspicious for emerging writers and poets, and from the intellectual turmoil some exceptional minds emerged. John S. Jenkins even goes as far as stating that these talented men were the cornerstones of the Elizabethan age. "Bacon, Shakespeare, Spenser, Raleigh, Sydney and Drake, and other names of like lustre, made

⁵⁸ Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 35.

⁵⁹ Frances A. Yates, "Queen Elizabeth as Astrea," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol x. (1947): 27.

⁶⁰ Michael Dobson, *England's Elizabeth: an afterlife in fame and fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

⁶¹ Dobson, *England's Elizabeth*, 2

the Elizabethan age glorious, not the selfish woman from which it borrows its title”⁶²

The dedication of *The Faerie Queene* to Queen Elizabeth⁶³ indicates that Spenser intended his grand romance to be read, or at least to be known about by the Queen. During the composition of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser resided in Ireland initially from 1580 as the secretary of Lord Grey, the Lord Deputy, and from 1583 as the deputy to Ludowick Bryskett, the Dublin Clerk to the Council of Munster.⁶⁴ Although after Lord Grey’s departure to England, it was Spenser’s choice to remain in Ireland, and the decision was probably based on financial grounds. Being the son of a weaver⁶⁵ Spenser could not boast about any wealth in the form of inheritance or steady income. His determination eventually yielded fruit: in 1590 Spenser became master of an extensive property at Kilcolman.⁶⁶ Yet, despite the still moderate wealth, Spenser was aspiring to courtly poetic success. He wrote his romance in the hope of receiving courtly titles and to become established as one of Elizabeth’s poets in the court.⁶⁷ On this account, Spenser – through Raleigh, his confidant – pursued to personally introduce both the first three and the second three books in the court. Facts did not satisfy his expectations: in 1590 he received a modest pension of 50 pounds, but in 1596 no reward was assigned.⁶⁸ Spenser’s premature death prevented his completion of the major epic poem. After a short period of distress and turmoil, he died in 1598.

⁶² Dobson, *England’s Elizabeth*, 272 quoting John S. Jenkins, *The Heroines of History* (New York, 1851), 320.

⁶³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 37. “TO THE MOST HIGH, MIGHTIE And MAGNIFICENT EMPRESSE RENOVVMD FOR PIETIE, VERTVE, AND ALL GRATIOVS GOVERNMENT ELIZABETH BY THE GRACE OF GOD QVEENE OF ENGLAND FRAVNCE AND IRELAND AND OF VIRGINIA, DEFENDOVR OF THE FAITH, &c. HER MOST HVMBLE SERVAVNT EDMVND SPENSER DOTH IN ALL HVMILITIE DEDICATE, PRESENT AND CONSECRATE THESE HIS LABOVRS TO LIVE WITH THE ETERNITIE OF HER FAME.”

⁶⁴ Helena Shire, *A Preface to Spenser* (London and New York: Longman, 1978), 21, 27.

⁶⁵ Andrew Hadfield, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15.

⁶⁶ Shire, *Preface*, 29.

⁶⁷ Hadfield, *Cambridge Companion*, 13.

⁶⁸ Shire, *Preface*, 32.

Because of his dedication of the romance to Elizabeth I, it can be assumed that the author to some degree had the queen in mind when portraying certain important female characters. Although Elizabeth's multiple faces can all have their equivalent among the grand Spenserian heroines, Spenser did not write the entire romance with the ruler's image in mind. Elizabeth definitely played a significant role in shaping Spenser's and contemporary men's image of women, but this was only one – though dominant facet – of their gynofilia or gynophobia. Hence, it could be assumed that the female characters of *The Faerie Queen* are not exclusively Elizabeth portrayals. In the course of the analysis of the romance, women in the romance will be handles as “independent” females, who exist in a fictional world.

It is more fruitful to view these fictional figures as creations of a sixteenth century mind, thus representations of a typical sixteenth century world view. Observing their existence and movement in the world of the romance provides us with intriguing clues about sixteenth century gender perception, both in bodily appearance and in deeper social aspects. It is also important to note that these women are not merely the arbitrary creations of one single author, and the suggestion here is that authorial control does not always work entirely. Despite the writer having clear ideas about his work and characters, occasionally his subconscious and intuitive responses can be prone to involuntarily creeping into the work and turning it into an independent, little universe. The intention here is, primarily, not to deal with either the author or his potential influences to any great extent, but with this universe, and especially the female – thus emphatic characters, who inhabit this world.

iii. Conduct books

Swerving away from languid medieval transcendentality, in the renaissance, a new female image emerged with a light and graceful disposition. While attaining androgyny, this new female naturally lost some of her maternal qualities. This is the age when the process of women became “more masculine and men more feminine”⁶⁹ began. Agnes Heller defined the period as “the dawn of feminine equality,”⁷⁰ when their scope for opportunities and autonomous action broadened. With the middle and higher class renaissance woman discovering her body, the roots of the concept of the modern woman materialised. This newer type of woman started to take care of herself to be fresh and desirable, and started her eternal fight with time and decay. From the 1400s onwards “[y]outh and beauty were cultivated. (...) Some women kept recipes for ointments to beautify their hair and keep their skin pale - a white skin was the image of money, it showed that the woman needs not expose her face to the sun, that she was no peasant.”⁷¹

As with appearance, so with intellect, women of higher social classes acquired an exceptional state. As Susanne Hull says “[i]n medieval and early Renaissance England, when books were extremely scarce and educational facilities limited, literacy was largely restricted to noble or upper-class families.”⁷² However, by the sixteenth century the range of this accessible knowledge also reached middle class women.⁷³ Under this climate, demand grew from upper and mostly middle class families for a practical guidebook with

⁶⁹ Gaia Servadio, *Renaissance Women* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 2.

⁷⁰ Heller Ágnes, *Renaissance Man*, translated from Hungarian by Richard E. Allen (London: Routledge, 1978), 274.

⁷¹ Servadio, *Renaissance Women*, 8.

⁷² Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient, English Books for Women 1475-1640* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982), 2.

⁷³ Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, 3.

clear rules of proper conduct. Writers, theologians, philosophers also welcomed the idea, since through the channel of reading they could address women, and plant the seeds of chaste behaviour in them. With practical guidance prescribing strict rules for everyday conduct and appearance conduct books aimed to counterbalance the idea of the free woman, which became stronger in the sixteenth century. These publications, following a traditional gender conception of male supremacy, attempted to control every facet of a woman's life, from appearance, to verbal utterances and private life.

This chapter is going to outline some of the most important and prominent rules prescribed by these books. The investigations here are guided by three popular conduct books of the age. The first and most important is *The education of a christen woman* written by Juan Luis Vives, the adviser of Queen Catherine of Aragon, and translated into English in 1529 by the talented Richard Hyrde. The book, originally written in Spanish, provides women with a moral compass from the cradle to the grave.

The second book to be considered was also influenced by Vives, Edmund Tilney's *A brief and pleasant discourse of duties in marriage, called the flower of friendship* (1568) dedicated to Queen Elizabeth. As its title reveals this book educates women about the traits and skills of a proper wife to make the flower of marriage flourish eternally. Finally, the third one, the internationally most celebrated guidance book for both sexes, is Castiglione's *The Coutyer*, published in England in 1561 translated by Thomas Hoby. Vives's and Castiglione's works were chosen as subjects for this investigation because of their sixteenth-century popularity, while Tilney's book is intriguing because it proves that an English Protestant author could think similarly to his Spanish and Italian colleagues in the matter of proper conduct.

The reason for placing this chapter before the analysis of Spenserian women is to see what forms of conduct were advised, encouraged or tolerated in actuality, and to be

able to compare the similarities and discrepancies between the romance's handling of certain transgressions, and official viewpoints on these.

There is no intention to list all the rules emerging in the above mentioned three conduct books. The aim is rather to collect the most important regulations focusing on major virtues and to grasp major tendencies guiding sixteenth century female lives. The comparison of the three books will reveal some individual differences, but at the same time, expose the generally homogenous handling of crucial issues regarding chastity, marriage or appearance.

The general tone and advice which define our conduct books and other works of this kind is the ardent propagation of chastity. This is the primary virtue, the source of all other reputable traits. As Hageman emphasises in the profound foreword to the 2002 Vives edition: "One critical departure is chastity, a pivotal concept for Vives. It invades virtually every chapter of his treatise, and he insists that it alone defines female character."⁷⁴ In the case of unmarried women, the definition of chastity is transparent and uncomplicated: from unmarried women absolute abstinence is required. Young girls have to make all possible effort to preserve their virginity, since their chastity is their only treasure. For men there are fields of life to excel in, but "a woman hath no charge to se to, but hir honestee and chastitee."⁷⁵

Therefore, this virtue has to be protected by demureness. "For shamefastnes and sobrenes be the inseparable companions of Chastitie, in so much that she cannot be chaste, that is not ashamed."⁷⁶ Yet, women are not only tempting, they can also be tempted. To prevent the awakening of female lust, Tilney suggests controlling their eyes.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth H. Hageman, introduction to *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, by Juan Luis Vives (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xlv.

⁷⁵ Vives, *Instruction*, A3r.

⁷⁶ Vives, *Instruction*, K1r.

Lady Julia talks about the consequences of impudent behaviour: “For the venom of love blindeth the eyes, and so bewitcheth the senses of us poore women, that as we can forsee nothing, so are we perswaded that all the vices of the beloved are rare.”⁷⁷ Here Edward Tilney attains female attention and approval for his rules of proper behaviour by putting the didactic words into his exemplary woman, Lady Julia's mouth. The eye-references of these conduct books present a rather ambiguous and logically inept picture of women: they are both the ones with dangerous tempting eyes, and the ones whose weak, feeble eyes cannot resist temptation.

The impurity of a woman would affect the core of her personality. While chaste, a woman is defined by her other traits, chastity merely constitutes the base on which a woman's personality can be constructed. Whereas when she wastes her purity, her other positive traits vanish with that, almost making her the embodiment of fornication, deserving utter self-reproach. “Nowe let the woman tourne to hir selfe and consydre hir owne ungraciousnes, she shall feare and abhorre hir selfe: nor take reste daie nor nyghte”⁷⁸

Vives even questions her right to exist. “O cursed mayde, and not worthy to lyue, the whiche wyllinglye spoyleth hir selfe of soo precious a thyng.”⁷⁹ In his interpretation, even death is better than unchaste life. The unfortunate instance of losing one's chastity entails not only the loss of a woman's own moral value, but – more importantly – total social condemnation. With the threat of exclusion from respectable life the pressure for middle and upper class women to preserve chastity becomes a prerequisite for not falling out of the protective bond of society. Hence chastity becomes not only a moral constraint, but a social one.

⁷⁷ Edward Tilney, *A briefe and pleasant discourse of duties in Mariage, called the Flower of Friendshippe* (London, 1568), D3v.

⁷⁸ Vives, *Instruction*, F1r.

⁷⁹ Vives, *Instruction*, E4r.

For nothing is more tender, than is the fame and estimacio[n] of women, nor nothinge more in daunger of wronge: in so much that it hath be sayde, and not without a cause, to hang by a cobweb, because those thynges, that I have rehersed, be required perfette in a woman: and folkes judgements bee dangerous to please.⁸⁰

A similar issue of honest chastity also appears at Castiglione, when Lord Cesar asserts that the bridle to women's incontinence “is zeale of true vertue, and the desire of good name”⁸¹

Yet, unmarried chastity does not exclude the search for a suitable spouse. On the contrary, social pressure taught these girls that their ultimate goal in life was to get married. However, sentiments behind getting married were highly different from the usual feelings of a modern marriage. “Married women were chattels in the sixteenth - and seventeenth-century England. They and all their personal possessions were legally under the control of their husbands.”⁸² Because of marriage being more of a business transaction than a relationship based on emotions, emphases fell not so much on love, passion or longing, but calculation and careful choice, and the initiation of the betrothal shall not come from the maid, but from her parents. As Vives suggests:

[I]t becometh not a maide to talke, where hir father and mother be in communication about hir mariage (...) And lette hir thinke that hir father and mother wyll provyde no lesse dydlygently for hir, than she wolde for hir selfe: but much better, by the reason they haue more experience and wysedome. Moreover it is not comely for a mayde to desyre mariage, and mucche lasse to shewe hir selfe to long therefore.”⁸³

The only acceptable way for a young girl facilitating marriage is true devotion. It is noticeable that chaste women are not supposed to display any affection even when its

⁸⁰ Vives, *Instruction*, L2 r.

⁸¹ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Courtyer*, translated by Sir Thomas Hoby (London, 1577), P7v.

⁸² Hull, *Silent, Chaste & Obedient*, 47.

⁸³ Vives, *Instruction*, P2r.

target is their would-be husband. Chastity has to go hand in hand with temperance and obedience.

In comparison to Vives, Castiglione's work displays a slightly more lenient tone. Although he also finds it inappropriate for women to be too keen to be acquainted with a man, Castiglione considers a slight encouragement acceptable, and even desirable. Lord Julian reckons that the lady can "shewe him whom she loveth all tokens of love."⁸⁴ Thus, here young women are advised to display a modicum of warmth towards the man they are fond of, in order not to intimidate him with unnecessary coldness.

Yet, even when a woman succeeds in finding a suitable husband, her conduct still remains scrutinised, the juggling with complicated, often unclear and unstated social laws and the struggle for favourable social reputation through chastity do not end with wedlock. Strict, though different rules apply to married women. In their instance, chastity will cease to be equal with virginity. Honesty, loyalty, devotion and obedience to the husband will become prevalent, and total abstinence will give way to continence. Tilney's entire work, *The Flower of Friendship* discusses this matter in depth and detail.

At the very beginning of Tilney's work, an assertion about the essence of marriage is stated: "The happinesse of mariage consisteth in a chast wife." Husbands seem to have no responsibility, and this assumption is later elaborated on in detail. "For the happinesse of matrimonie, doth consist in a chaste matrone, so that if suche a woman be conioyned in true, and unfayned love, to hir beloved spouse, no doubt their lyues shall be stable, easie, sweete, ioyfull, and happy."⁸⁵

As seen in the case of the unmarried, chastity always goes hand in hand with modesty for married women as well. Humbleness is the key to a marriage of contentment.

⁸⁴ Castiglione, *The Courtyer*, Q8v.

⁸⁵ Tilney, *Flower of Friendship*, D4r.

Shamefastness “is of such power, and vertue, that it sufficeth alone to defende it gainst all weathers. And if so be that there were but one onely vertue in a woman, it might well be shamefastnesse.”⁸⁶ Tilney amends his rules by clearly stating that looks are inferior to inner qualities. For Tilney, bodily attraction is not essential, what really matters is chastity and temperance.

We maye see a foule deformed woman, that truely feareth, and serveth God, so well beloved of hir husband, as if she were the fayrest of bewtie in a countrie, and women voyde of Gods favour, and grace, what qualities soever they have besides, seldome, or never enjoye they the happie estate of matrimony, nor shall they ever attaine to the sweete, and perfite smell of thys moste delectable *Flower* of spousall amity, and friendship.⁸⁷

Married chastity cannot equal virginity, since the meaning and main purpose of married life are children. On this account, it is interesting to examine what the general opinion was about women who were unable to bear offspring. We might assume that socially these women were frowned upon, a presumption that is underscored by McManus’s remark that “[m]en, too, recorded their disappointment and concern when their wives failed to conceive, which suggests that the emotional pressure placed on barren women, intentional or not, must have been intense.”⁸⁸ As a rule we expect the conduct book to be more scrupulous than the unwritten practices of real life. However, in the case of female infertility conduct books display understanding and sympathy, considering the perception of barrenness with sympathy. “But peradventure thou fearest the rebuke of barennesse. Thou art a chrysten woman. Therefore understande, that nowe thys saiynge is past, Cursed be that woman in Israel that is baren”⁸⁹ Vives even indicates that women who are genuinely unable to conceive can be considered fortunate. “Euripides saide ful wel: She

⁸⁶ Tilney, *Flower of Friendshippe*, D7v.

⁸⁷ Tilney, *Flower of Friendshippe*, E7r.

⁸⁸ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 207.

⁸⁹ Vives, *Instruction*, Ff2v.

that lacketh children / Is happye of that misfortune.”⁹⁰ The statement probably refers to the high mortality rate of childbirth, which infertile women are not threatened by, and also to the theory that to conceive women have to find pleasure in sexual intercourse,⁹¹ which “sin” barren women are not guilty of. Hence the acceptance of infertility in the renaissance does not entail those modern thoughts that childlessness entails less responsibility or more time for one’s individualistic aims, which he clearly disapproved of. This suspicion is proven by Vives’s encouragement of adopting foundlings. “Perauenture thou woldeste fayne see children comen of thyne owne body, shall they be of any other facion troweste thou than other children be? and thou haste children of the citee, and also other christen children, whom thou maist beare motherly affection unto.”⁹²

In his treatment of chastity, Vives even goes as far as saying that a “maryed woman oughte to bee of greater chastitee than an unmaryed.”⁹³ The reason for this is probably that when a married woman errs, she brings shame not only upon herself, but also upon her husband. When being maiden, a woman can only ruin her own reputation, whereas when married, the husband’s even more precious prominence is also at stake.

From these lines, we can deduce that the core of marital chastity is fidelity. With more emphasis on loyalty, its antithesis is also heightened, amplifying adultery into the gravest sin. “Christe in his gossell, where he wolde algates that men shall keepe their wyues, nor deuorse from theim for none occasion: yet he dooeth except adultery.”⁹⁴

From these conduct books, women can be gleaned as having a high propensity to err when making decisions on their own. Obedience appears to be the tool against it.

⁹⁰ Vives, *Instruction*, Jj 2v.

⁹¹ Mary R. Lefkowitz, Maureen B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome* (London: Duckworth, 2005), 252.

⁹² Vives, *Instruction*, Ff2r.

⁹³ Vives, *Instruction*, S1r.

⁹⁴ Vives, *Instruction*, S2v.

Tilney argues that a woman “must of dutie be unto hir husband in all things obedient”⁹⁵ and “[t]he man both by reason, and law, hath the soueraigntie ouer his wife.”⁹⁶ The husband’s authority is indubitable, with both reason and law on his side. Although women are adjuncts to their spouses, they are not insignificant: if behaving properly, they shall bring glory to their husbands, if inappropriately, shame. To avoid this latter instance, women shall master the laws and rules of private life. According to Vives and Tilney, a comprehensive set of rules can be found, which give general and practical advice to women on how to behave in their private lives. So far, mostly the theoretical aspects of ideal women have been considered, now more emphasis will be placed on the actual operation of these internal principles in everyday life.

As a prerequisite, as Castiglione notes, all women can do is devote their energies to forestalling malicious misrepresentations of their conduct:

She ought also to be more circumspect & to take better heed that shee give no occasion to be yll reported of & so to behave hirselfe, that she be not only not spotted w[ith] any fault, but not so much as w[ith] suspition. Because a woman hath not so many wayes to defende hyr selfe from slanderous reportes, as hath a man.⁹⁷

The double standard of the different judgement of men and women is explicitly stated here: sinful men are treated more leniently than women.

Vives is even more careful than Castiglione in terms of preserving a woman’s good reputation. He claims that a woman’s conduct is frequently misunderstood by the public, hence it is better to completely avoid social gathering.

If thou speake muche, they reckon the light: if thou speake uncunningly, they count the dull witted: if thou speake cunningly, thou shalte be called a shrew: if thou answere not quickly, thou shalte be called proude, or yl brought up: if thou anwere redily, they shall

⁹⁵ Tilney, *Flower of Friendshippe*, E1v.

⁹⁶ Tilney, *Flower of Friendshippe*, E1r.

⁹⁷ Castiglione, *The Courtyer*, N7r.

saie thou wylte be sone overcomen (...) How muche were it better to abyde at home, than go forth and here so many judgements.⁹⁸

From Vives's point of view, intrigue dominates the community, deeds and words are often misinterpreted, hence, women had better refrain from appearing in public. Castiglione does not hold such a pessimistic opinion about social life. Although he shares the belief with Vives that reputation often does not depend on behaviour only, but on the social interpretation of a woman's conduct. However, Castiglione's answer to this phenomenon is not to avoid people, but to acquire those elements of behaviour, which can protect a woman from unfavourable judgement. Castiglione replies to Vives's concerns:

Accompanying with her sober and quiet maners, and with the honesty that must alwayes be a stay to hir dedes, a ready livenesse of wit, whereby shee may declare hir selfe far wide from dulnesse: but wyth suche a kinde of goodnesse, that she may bee esteemed no lesse chaste, wyse and courteise, that pleasaunt, feat conceited and sober.⁹⁹

According to Castiglione, speech and apt verbal utterances also constitute an important part of good conduct. Although he does not discourage women from talking, he admits that occasionally silence and the lack of reply tell more about a woman's good conduct than well-constructed sentences. Harnessing female verbosity enhances eloquence. Castiglione concurs that the appropriate response of a courtly lady to wanton conversation is neither to join in nor to leave, but to use the occasion as an opportunity to display a carefully constructed feminine modesty: "This woman ought not therefore...be so squeimish and make wise to abhorre both the company & the talke (...) for a man maye lightlye gesse that shee fayned to be so coye to hyde that in herselfe which she doubted others might come to the knowledge of."¹⁰⁰

As public life involves risk, Vives, and Tilney, contrary to Castiglione, do not

⁹⁸ Vives, *Instruction*, L2v.

⁹⁹ Castiglione, *The Courtyer*, N7r.

¹⁰⁰ Castiglione, *The Courtyer*, N7r.

confine themselves to warn ladies of any potential dangers, but rather encourage them to occupy themselves with appropriate, devotional kinds of activities. “[B]y the occasion of workyng, she shulde thynke on nothyng, but suche as pertineth unto the service of our lorde.”¹⁰¹ Similarly with Tilney: “The woman must not be ydell.”¹⁰² Curiously, less vain forms of entertainment such as reading were discouraged. Vives's proclamation is rather severe: “For many, in whome ther is no good mynd al ready, reden those bokes, to kepe the[m]selfe in the thoughtes of love. It were better for them not only to have no learning at all, but also to lese theyr eies, that thei shuld not reade.”¹⁰³ Since it is ultimately impossible to control a woman's interpretation of an amorous text, Vives resorts to a forceful, if unrealistic solution: if a woman persists in reading books on love, he suggests that “she maie be kept from all readyng, And so by disuse, forget learnyng, if it can be done.”¹⁰⁴

Restraint entails not only harnessing one's joy, but in the event of tragedy, also one's desperation. If widowed, a woman shall not languish, but as a true Christian, have faith in the afterlife. “For if we beleue that Jesus is deade, and reuyved againe: so shall god like wise bring againe with him all that be deade by him”¹⁰⁵ Suicide, even out of love or hopelessness, is sinful, hence disparaged: “I haue seene some, that wolde with a right good will haue quitte their housbandes lyfes with theyr owne. Wherefore there is no reason, why they shuld lay theyr fautes in the condicion of the Region.”¹⁰⁶ As in all aspects of life, in the case of extreme sadness, surrendering to one's emotions instead of temperate perseverance is reproachful.

The aim of this condensed summary of conduct books is not so much to compare the different publications prevailing in late sixteenth century England, but to outline the

¹⁰¹ Vives, *Instruction*, G1r.

¹⁰² Tilney, *Flower of Friendshippe*, E4r.

¹⁰³ Vives, *Instruction*, D2r-v.

¹⁰⁴ Vives, *Instruction*, D4r.

¹⁰⁵ Vives, *Instruction*, Ll.r.

¹⁰⁶ Vives, *Instruction*, Kk3r.

boundaries of acceptable behaviour of the age. Vives's and Tilney's work framed high morals and idealism, whereas Castiglione promoted a more down-to-earth, practical attitude. Despite the different points of view, the main principles of the books did not clash, chastity, obedience and loyalty being the fundamental values in all three of them, and lewdness, adultery and vanity being the most condemnable traits. The fourth chapter (*Behaviour*) is going to concentrate on female behavioural patterns of *The Faerie Queene*, and to explore whether the rules of the conduct books also prevail in the romance world. With *The Faerie Queene* and its characters being fictional, many actions can be excused within the possibility of their allegorical interpretation. Yet, reading conduct books in parallel with the romance can be revealing. Although conduct books focus on real life, at least their scope remains within the sixteenth century, whereas our notion of sexual and behavioural transgressions is influenced by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The comparison of the female images depicted in *The Faerie Queene* and the set of rules delineated in conduct books can show whether Spenser's female figures are judged according to conventional morals, or measured against an individual set of rules. It would be revealing to see which and whose sins are forgiven in the romance, and whether these are commensurate with that of the conduct books, and also whether the criteria for exemplariness coincide or not.

III. Appearance

Although Spenser has long been praised for his outstanding pictorial skills,¹⁰⁷ his images were mostly regarded as isolated pictures, ekphrases and not as inherent elements of the text. However, as Bender noted, this attitude is changing: “recent studies of Spenser have been to show that his images are not merely decorative, but that they are integral to the allegory. They are part of a complex metaphorical system the effect of which depends upon rhetorical arrangement of language and upon iconography, or *meaning* in the broadest sense.”¹⁰⁸ And indeed *The Faerie Queene* possesses valuable merits of this kind: sensuous images, detailed descriptions and intriguing episodes. Panofsky also defined iconography as a “branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.”¹⁰⁹ In the case of *The Faerie Queene* this approach will prove to be fruitful. Instead of exclusively concentrating on looks and appearance this study aims to capture and discover the relationship between characters’ outer essence and their inner traits, and to explore the romance’s general attitude towards its characters, and to what extent that may be dependent on their looks. As Bender summarises the main question about the special kind of visuality employed in Spenser’s text, “is not what great paintings a particular poem evokes, but how poems which attempt to imitate our experience of real and imagined visual worlds can seem like pictures at

¹⁰⁷ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 33: “when a poet is describing paintings, as Spenser does so often, the colours mentioned are supposed to act on one as they would do in a painting. Now, it is naturally harder to analyse the visual arts than poetry, because their modes of satisfaction are further removed from the verbal system on which the discursive intelligence usually supports itself.”

¹⁰⁸ John B. Bender, *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 20.

¹⁰⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), 26.

all.”¹¹⁰

In Tudor England images were inferior to poetry,¹¹¹ since pictures “dealt only with outward appearances.”¹¹² This assumption is confirmed by Sir Philip Sidney, when writing in his *Defense of Poesie*, that poetry is “a speaking picture,”¹¹³ which incorporates the essences of other art forms and disciplines, and animates them with its creative powers: “so no doubt the philosopher with his learned definitions (...) replenisheth the memory with many infallible grounds of wisdom, which, notwithstanding, lie dark before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy.”¹¹⁴

The concept that words and the written form (especially sacred writings), possess more philosophical depth, and in opposition to pictures - they provide access to ultimate truth prevailed in Protestant theology.¹¹⁵ Prior to that, in the middle ages images were venerated and admired. “Symbolism was very nearly the life's breath of medieval thought. The habit of seeing of all things in their meaningful interrelationships and their relationship to the eternal both muted the boundaries between things and kept the world of thought alive with radiant, glowing colour.”¹¹⁶ Elucidating the complex relationship of imagery and hearing in connection with the Bible, Tibor Fabiny - citing Saint Paul - concludes that “[t]he text is a medium to transmit the 'voice' from the 'mouth' to the 'ear.'”¹¹⁷ Highlighting the changing attitude towards images throughout the many centuries of Christianity Tibor

¹¹⁰ Bender, *Spenser*, 24.

¹¹¹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 170.

¹¹² Guy, *Tudor England*, 434

¹¹³ Sidney, *Selection*, 107.

¹¹⁴ Sidney, *Selection*, 112.

¹¹⁵ Szőnyi György Endre, *Pictura & Scriptura* (Szeged: JATE Press, 2004), 14: “...a protestánsok inkább ‘meghallják’ az igazságot, tehát a szavakat közvetítő fület részesítenék előnyben.”

¹¹⁶ Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 249.

¹¹⁷ Fabiny Tibor, *The Lion and the Lamb, Figuralism and Fulfilment in the Bible, Art and Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 78.

Fabiny also notes that the sixteenth century Puritan “anti-visual impulses” in England and the general Protestant belief of the “significance of the divine voice” appeal primarily to the ear of the believer.¹¹⁸

According to Camille Paglia, the dominance of the ear over the eye is also a *faux pas* of modern western culture, which “has hugely overestimated the centrality of language” and “has failed to see the electrifying sign language of images.”¹¹⁹

In this almost iconoclastic environment – Paglia notes – Spenser represents a rather unique voice. In his Apollonian perception the image’s role is as vital as that of the text. Words and images usually go hand in hand, complementing and enforcing each other.¹²⁰ However, a careful scrutiny will reveal, that in a few curious cases text and imagery contradict each other. By analysing female appearances in *The Faerie Queene* we will see that occasionally while words go on praising conventional conduct, images become independent, depicting the beautiful bodies of less venerable women. Hence, Spenser is deemed as “Botticelli’s heir.”¹²¹ As Paglia says “Spenser puts English literature into the ancient dynasty of western sexual personae. The arts, except for portraiture, were weak in the English Renaissance, partly because of Henry VIII's destruction of Catholic images. Spenser recreates English pictorialism in poetic form.”¹²² Bender amply affirmed similar observations about the essence of Spenser’s pictorialism: “the poet engages his reader’s imagination through artful, inevitably contrived analogues of vision.”¹²³

Spenser's poetry indeed comes to the fore in its most visual form when presenting and representing women. His females are multi-faced and volatile, ranging from the foolishly naive through to the virtuous and also the Amazonian; all of whom share a

¹¹⁸ Fabiny, *The Lion*, 80-81.

¹¹⁹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 34.

¹²⁰ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 170.

¹²¹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 170.

¹²² Paglia, *Sexual Personae* 170.

¹²³ Bender, *Spenser*, 29.

common and scarcely fathomable feature, a certain celestial glamour which emanates from their skin creating a faint halo around them. This Spenserian female is the manifestation of the archetypal renaissance liberated woman, who probably never existed in reality, but in the early modern mind. Despite this image being abstract and idealised, as Agnes Heller concluded, its importance is still vital: “we have already seen in many instances that the appearance of new ideals reveals the existence of new realities in life, even if later the new realities of life disappoint hopes of establishing those ideals in practice.”¹²⁴ Regardless of whether this new aspect of women got embodied in reality or not, a novel idea of femininity emerged and spread gradually. “The Renaissance created a vision of womanhood which contrasted with the amply formed mother-figure of the past. The new woman that appears on the frescos and paintings of the Renaissance, whether in the guise of a Virgin Mary or of a goddess, was slender, almost androgynous.”¹²⁵

It is impossible not to notice that the renaissance admired symmetrical, orderly, radiant women, and despised ugliness, disfigurement or monstrosity in them. The seemingly most obvious reason for this utter disgust is aesthetics. However, sometimes the disapproval of certain types of woman and certain behaviours cannot be blamed exclusively on taste. Renaissance art rejected earthly, bodily references, which recalled the actual, naturalistic nature of the female body. In Paglia’s synthesis “[m]enstruation and childbirth are an affront to beauty and form. In aesthetic terms, they are spectacles of frightful squalor. (...) Woman’s beauty is a compromise with her dangerous archetypal allure. It gives the eye the comforting illusion of intellectual control over nature.”¹²⁶

Taking a glimpse at Spenserian female heroines suggests that this world is also dominated by angelic beauties. Although they are mundane characters with concrete

¹²⁴ Heller, *Renaissance Man*, 275.

¹²⁵ Servadio, *Renaissance Woman*, 3.

¹²⁶ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 17.

bodies, these bodies are impeccably designed and flawless, without the frailties of womanhood. “Spenser removes the usual archetypal basis of female force, the daemonic, and imagines his heroines as Apollonian angels.”¹²⁷ In this world of glowing beauty, where ugliness is amoral, virtue equals beauty. However, this almost religious belief in beauty does not automatically involve superficiality: here beauty does not stand for itself, but exists as an outward appearance of corresponding inner qualities.

Through a thorough analysis, diversity can be highlighted, and the difference between these distinct groups exhibited. Due to a detailed, precise description most characters’ appearance is multifaceted, and carries multiple aspects of interpretation.

Spenser’s large appearances¹²⁸ are not illustrations for a moral allegory, but signs of internal traits which often substitute characterisation, since from dresses, objects, posture and their implications personae’s essences unfold, and reveal themselves. Spenser “is particularly drawn to dress and other items of apparel generally, indulging in minute descriptions of the garments worn by his women,”¹²⁹ and through these descriptions basic traits of certain characters can be captured.

i. Chaste women

Spenser’s heroines, who are reminiscent of Botticelli’s blonde females,¹³⁰ offer real indulgence in imagery. They are depicted sensuously and meticulously, with a blazon-like catalogues, through closely focusing on their emblematic bodily parts, and through the description of their close and wider surroundings.

¹²⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 175.

¹²⁸ cf. Polucci, *Women*, 53-81, Chapter 3 “General Properies and Large Appearances.”

¹²⁹ Paolucci, *Women*, 23.

¹³⁰ Apart from the intuitive resemblance see Pagia, *Sexual Personae*, 187, about Acrasia and Verdant: “This sultry postcoital scene is based on Botticell’s *Venus and Mars*.”

Belphoebe

Belphoebe, the traditionally moonlike goddess is garlanded the most exquisite portrayals of the romance. Her first appearance in its ekphrasis-like entirety depicts a self-conscious Botticellian woman. We are flooded with eleven stanzas (II.iii.22-31) with rapturous details decorated by ecstatic adjectives: “heauenly pourtraict of bright Angels hew” “withouten blame or blot” “iurie forehead” “glorious mirrhour of celestiaall grace.” After the general description, the imaginary camera zooms onto her dress and we see every minute detail of it.

[Belphoebe] was yclad, for heat of scortching aire,
All in a silken Camus lyllly whight,
Purfled vpon with many a folded plight,
Which all about besprinkled was throughout,
With golden aygulets, that glistred bright,
Like twinckling stares, and all the skirt about
Was hemd with golden fringe.” (II.iii.26)

Then a whole stanza (II.iii.27) is devoted just to her “gilden buskins” with “golden bendes” and a “rich Iewell” “vnder her knee.” Her slender white figure seems to emerge as a refreshing gentle breeze in the stuffy heat. Belphoebe appears in these stanzas as a transcendental, unattainable goddess, however, as the description culminates, and as it gets increasingly detailed and corporeal, a modicum of eroticism is to be discovered: as enumerating her armour the sight of the narrator accidentally shifts from her fore laying “bauldricke” to her “snowy breast” adding the detail that the belt of the quiver “did diuide / Her daintie paps; which like young fruit in May / Now little gan to swell, and being tide, / Through her thin weed their places only signified.” (II.iii.28)

Spenser can indulge himself in female hair. Here, an entire stanza is devoted to Belphoebe’s loosely flowing hair:

Her yellow lockes crisped, like golden wyre,
 About her shoulders weren loosly shed,
 And when the winde mongst them did inspyre,
 They waued like a penon wide dispred,
 And low behinde her backe were scattered:
 And whether art it were, or heedlesse hap,
 As through the flouring forrest rash she fled,
 In her rude haire sweet flowres themselues did lap,
 And flourishing fresh leaues and blossomes did enwrap. (II.iii.30)

As Bender states, “[w]hat at first appears to be a single rich image is compounded by imagining Belpheobe’s hair in different states – still, moved, and in motion. The three descriptive units are separated by explanatory clauses, so that we see three separate moments, not one moment perceived in three different ways.”¹³¹ Typical of Spenser's Protestant restraint, whenever a depiction contains the slightest erotic tone, an excuse is sought: here after having read Belpheobe's ecstatic portrayal we realize that it was Trompart through whose eyes we spied on the huntress. As a persona, in the entire romance Belpheobe is endowed with liberty and independence. Her freely flowing hair, representing life-force, strength and energy¹³² is in accord with her existence. Nevertheless, despite the sudden shift of point of view, Belpheobe’s description remains striking and sophisticated. On this account, the technique becomes suspicious: such a base character as Trompart would be unable to utter such words and express subtle thoughts.

Another resplendent Belpheobe-description is her sensuous rose metaphor.

That dainty Rose, the daughter of her Morne,
 More deare then life she tendered, whose flower
 The girlond of her honour did adorne:
 Ne suffred she the Middays scorching power,
 Ne the sharp Northerne wind thereon to showre,
 But lapped vp her silken leaues most chaire,

¹³¹ Bender, *Spenser*, 59.

¹³² Cooper, *Traditional Symbols*, 77.

When so the forward skye began to lower:
But soone as calmed was the Christall aire,
She did it faire dispred, and let to flourish faire. (III.v.51)

By employing the traditional metaphor of equating love with sickness and the beloved woman with a flower, the text suggests that the rose would be the only medication for Timias's illness. Yet, despite his pining, Timias never manages to recover. Belpheobe never lets herself fully submerge in Timias's love. Although she was "full of soft passion" towards him, and "her lilly hands twaine, / Into his wound the iuyce thereof did scruze" (III.v.33), she ignores his more serious advances. The use of the female personal pronoun while referring to the rose softly merges the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor. Flowers in general, and especially roses are the symbol of completion,¹³³ and also conventional erotic symbols of females, thus the object and the nature of Timias's desire is expressed rather explicitly through the flower. Another analogue to emphasise the rose-Belpheobe likeness is the way both of them withstand the heat. Although there are more cantos between the lengthy Belpheobe portrayal and the rose metaphor the reader instinctively still associates the flower with the goddess. When the image of the fresh rose appears it automatically evokes the picture of Belpheobe as a refreshing breeze in the reader: the two rosy figures not affected by the scorching heat. (cf. II.iii.22. and III.v.51.)

Britomart

Britomart is the only other female in the romance who can live up to Belpheobe's magic glow. Yet, the knightly princess can also display numerous other faces. As Paglia

¹³³ Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 275.

notes “Britomart is one of the sexually most complex women in literature.”¹³⁴ On the other hand Joanna Thompson states that “[t]hose who argue that Britomart surpasses allegory to develop into some sort of ‘realistic’ character are taking her beyond the boundaries of Renaissance poetic convention”¹³⁵ At first glimpse these statements seem clashing, but a more thorough inspection reveals the two arguments’ complementary nature. Britomart is deemed to be complex on account of the multiple roles she takes on. Nevertheless, the shift between these roles is not underpinned by a psychologically apt description of Britomart's altering mind. Her sexually complex persona can be understood not through inner monologues, but through looking at the different roles she falls into. She is seen as a “male” knight, a sexually waking teenager, a young active woman on the way of finding herself, and a betrothed woman, ready for married life.

Since Britomart is often seen through the eyes of others, she is convincingly depicted as a male warrior. For instance when Guyon and Artegall first catch sight of her: “They spide a knight, that towards pricked faire / (...) / He them espying, gan himselfe prepare, / And on his arme addresse his goodly shield” (III.i.4). Or at the entrance of Malbecco's Castle:

Another knight, whom tempest thither brought,
Came to that Castle, and with earnest mone
Like as the rest, late entrance deare besought
But like so as the rest he prayd for nought,
For flatly he of entrance was refusd,
Sorely thereat he was displeased.” (III.ix.12)

Here even the personal pronouns switch to *he*, thus, Britomart is depicted both verbally and image-wise as an indistinguishably, unsuspecting, impeccable masculine knight.

¹³⁴ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 182.

¹³⁵ Thompson, *Britomart*, 6.

As for the appearance of Britomart as a young girl, no explicit portrait is depicted. Only when Glauce rubs her shivering body are we provided with a loosely blazon-like catalogue of her body, which only gives the impression of a blazon, without aesthetic information: “her twixt her armes twaine / (...) / And euery trembling ioynt, and euery vaine / She softly felt, and rubbed buisily / (...) / And her faire deawy eies with kisses deare / She oft did bath.” (III.ii.34) Otherwise we are confined to the commonplace adjectives, which still give us an idea, since they define the realm Britomart belongs to: she is fair, alabaster skinned, royal, thus we – rightly – assume that she is both in her appearance and character a noble, young lady.

During her quest for Artegall, Britomart herself gradually matures. When occasionally she lets the world take a glimpse of her feminine side, instead of the initial insecure girl we see an attractively glamorous young woman. As a warrior knight, normally she hides all signs of her femininity. She acts as a male, thus regarded as a male. A conspicuous event of this cross-gender existence is when in Castle Joyous Lady Malecasta attempts to entice her: “... wooed him her Paramoure to be; / Now making girlonds of each flowre that grew, / To crowne his golden lockes with honour dew.” (III.i.35.) The masculine pronouns strengthen Malecasta's perspective of Britomart's supposed virility. Despite the rejection she decides to make more emphatic advances, and enter “the knight's” chamber at night. But here, instead of warm welcome she encounters Britomart's sword. The lady's shrieks wake up the others who - to their astonishment - witness “Their Lady [Malecasta] lying on the sencelesse grownd; / On th'other side, they saw the warlike Mayd / All in her snow-white smocke, with locks vnbownd, / Threatning the point of her avenging blade.” (III.i.63) Thus Britomart's secret is revealed. Probably this is the most intimate moment when the reader can observe Britomart. And this is her most sexually attractive, powerful moment: in the belief that she is a male warrior “those

six Knights” (III.i.63) see their fellow knight in a white nightgown with her blonde locks down, flailing with a heavy sword. “Britomart's abandonment of her armor in Castle Joyeous and loosening of her hair not only mark her as unmistakably feminine but also foreshadow modest submission to her future husband.”¹³⁶ But this moment of revelation is ephemeral: she instantly gains control, and transforms back into masculinity. Further experience and confidence are needed for her to be able to handle her femininity. A few cantos later Britomart purposely displays her flowing locks of hair:

And eke that straunger knight emongst the rest
Was for like need enforst to disaray:
Tho whenas vailed was her loftie crest,
Her golden locks, that were in tramels gay
Vpbounden, did them selues adowne display,
And raught vnto her heeles; like sunny beames,
That in a cloud their light did long time stay,
Their vapour vaded, shew their golden gleames,
And through the persant aire shoote forth their azure streames. (III.ix.20.)

And again after displaying her vulnerability, for another book, she puts on again her masculine attire. The turning point in her changing gender is her battle with her destined love, her future husband, Artegall. He angrily shears away her helmet, making her femininity apparent. After the symbolic act of Artegall discovering Britomart’s true gender, the princess abandons her knightly armour, and takes up her destined role as the lady of a worthy knight.

And round about the same, her yellow heare
Hauing through stirring loosd their wonted band,
Like to a golden border did appeare,
Framed in goldsmithes forge with cunning hand:
Yet goldsmithes cunning could not understand
To frame such subtile wire, so shine cleare.

¹³⁶ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 178.

For it did glister like the golden sand (IV.vi.20)

From this point is Britomart's womanhood dated. "During her encounter with Artegall in IV.vi.20, Britomart's hair begins to assume a more overtly sexual significance when it is loosened from its 'wonted band,' as if to anticipate the relaxation of her virginal control over her body."¹³⁷ The teenage girl matures into a woman.

The last image of Britomart is that of the jealous bride. Upon hearing about Artegall's captivity in Radegund "[a] while she walkt, and chauft; a while she threw / Her selfe vppon her bed, and did lament." (V.vi.13) Here she appears feminine, her gestures suggest lack of former masculine hardness and self-control.

Amoret

In the course of her story, Britomart attains a young female, called Amoret as her companion. Amoret's story begins *in medias res*, when Britomart discovers her in Busirane's castle during Cupid's masque. The bloody and grotesque scene of the masque is one of those utterly cruel parts of the romance:

Her [Amoret's] brest all naked, as net iuory,
Without adorne of gold or siluer bright,
Wherewith the Craftesman wonts it beautify,
Of her dew honour was despoyled quight,
And wide wound therein (O rueful sight)
Entrenched deepe with knife accursed keene,
Yet freshly bleeding forth her fainting spright,
(The worke of cruell hand) was to be seene,
That dyde in sanguine red her skin all snowy cleene.

At that wide orifice her trembling hart

¹³⁷ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 178.

Was drawne forth, and in siluer basin layd,
Quite through transfixed with a deadly dart,
And her bloud yet steeming fresh embayd. (III.xii.19-21)

The two dominant colours are red and white: her ivory breast is contrasted with her wide wound. Finally, red proves to be stronger, it dyes her snowy skin, and we have the image of Amoret's red heart throbbing in a silver basin of the climax of the wild procession. The motif of the knife slitting her ivory skin is reminiscent of Amavia's dagger slashing her alabaster breast. The sadistically erotic ambiance is strengthened at Cupid's masque by the emphasis on Amoret's "all naked" breast. The horror of these events seemingly does not abhor the narrator. His voice is more sensuous than disgusted. This matter-of-fact tone and the detailed report make the reader wince. The unpleasant semblance will escalate during her further miseries. But prior to that, as a counterpoint, through Scudamour's perspective we are given an account of a gentle Amoret in a halcyon environment. She was living in her step mother, Venus's temple in idyllic harmony: She "was all in lilly white arayd, / With siluer streames amongst the linnen stray'd/ Like to the Morne, when first her shyning face / Hath to the gloomy world it selfe bewray'd." (IV.x.52) Clearly the ragged, constantly fleeing Amoret we mostly see in the bulk of the romance is very different from this figure dressed in silver-white silk. Although the former preserves some of the latter's sophistication, she loses her transcendental unattainability, and becomes more of an earthly woman exposed to calamities, hardships and the despotism of men.

Belpheobe's genealogy in Book III canto iv informs us about her twin sister, Amoret, who was raised by Venus, while Belpheobe by Diana. In Book IV cantos vii-viii the story of the sisters intertwines once more. Timias –being desperately in love with Belpheobe – is also attracted to the more human, soft and feminine Amoret (which makes the unreasonable huntress jealous). Amoret being the step-daughter of Venus, bears many

characteristics of the goddess, including the openness to chaste love. Thus she possesses the “healing rose,” which Timias demands from Belpheobe – in vain. Although the twin sisters’ resemblance is never emphasised, their concurrent conception suggests their identical nature, and similar looks. With the same man being attracted by both of them and the confusion of their attributes, it is highly probable that we shall imagine Amoret similarly shining, fair and blonde as Belpheobe.

Venus’s temple is the cradle of Amoret, from where her destined lover, Scudamour has to attain her with cunning and force. As the knight enters her sanctuary he beholds Venus’s statue, which is one of the most curious, ichnographically complex and mystic images of the romance. “And bother feete and legs together twyned / Were with a snake, whose head & tail were fast combined.” (IV. x. 40) As John Manning notes, this is an unusual depiction of the goddess, since normally chains and stocks symbolise matrimonial fidelity, but “Spenser has her bound ‘with a snake.’ The serpent biting its own tail was a hieroglyph of eternity.”¹³⁸ However, this is not the most riveting aspect of her present representation; it is Venus’s body, which genuinely puzzles the reader.

The cause why she was couered with a vele,
Was hard to know, for that her Priests the same
From peoples knowledge labour’d to concele.
But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame,
Nor any blemish, which the worke mote blame;
But for, they say, she hath both kinds in one,
Both male and female, both vnder one name:
She syre and mother is her selfe alone,
Begets and eke conceiues, ne needeth other none. (IV.x.41)

Uncustomary for the untrained eye, Venus, the goddess of Beauty is depicted as a hermaphrodite. Nevertheless, if we look at Venus representations, we will see that the

¹³⁸ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 709.

image harks back to long tradition of that kind. Wind points out that Venus's "double nature could be refined to the highest points of either reverence or frivolity or both."¹³⁹

Later Wind quotes the Bible to provide understanding of the hermaphrodite Venus:

In the Bible itself, the transition from the singular to the plural is mysteriously abrupt in Genesis i, 27: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God create he him; male and female created he them.' Philo and Origen inferred from this passage – and their authority ranked high with Renaissance Platonists – that the first and original man was androgynous; that the division into male and female belonged to a later and lower state of creation; and that, when all created things return to their maker, the unfolded and divided state of man will be re-infolded in the divine essence.¹⁴⁰

It also adds to Venus's mystery that the priests conceal her true essence from human beings, who are not mature enough to grasp such complexity. In her wholeness not only her aesthetic male and female side is present but deeper sociological and biological aspects of both genders: she is paternal and maternal. She incorporates the traits of a "syre" and a mother, she is able to provide and breed. She is not androgynous, in the current sense of the word, which refers to looks of indefinable sex. Her masculine and feminine traits do not annul each other, rather the opposite, their essences unite, thus Venus is in possession of the gist of both genders, she is able to engender and to generate, hence she is complete.

In the 1590 version of *The Faerie Queene* the – then final – Book III ended with the romantic union of Amoret and Scudamour.

Lightly he clipt her twixt his armes twaine,
And streightly did embrace her body bright,
Her body, late the prison of sad paine,
Now the sweet lodge of loue and deare delight:
But she faire Lady ouercommen quight
Of huge affection, did in pleasure melt,
And in sweete rauishment pord out her spright.
No word they spake, nor earthly thing they felt,
But like two senceles stocks in long embracement dwelt. (III.xii.45/a)

¹³⁹ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Myseries in the Renaissance* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 77.

¹⁴⁰ Wind, *Pagan Myseries*, 213.

The lovers' passionate melting into each other picture a hermaphroditic statue, which assumption is enforced by the narrator's alienating aside to the reader: "Had ye them seene, ye would haue surely thought, / That they had beene that faire Hermaphrodite" (III.xii.46/a). Eventually Spenser deleted these stanzas from the romance. According to Paglia "Spenser may have cancelled these stanzas because they violate his own Apollonian laws, trespassing the boundaries of form."¹⁴¹ In the 1596 version Amoret and Scudamor's search for each other is frustratingly futile, they never see each other again. Modern editions publish both the 1590 and 1596 endings for Book III. Hence, recent readers are allowed the chance of recognizing the parallel entwining of Amoret and her stepmother, Venus. In the centre of Venus's temple, where Amoret was brought up, the goddess's hermaphroditic statue is erected, which gives additional meaning to the analeptically shown scene when Amoret herself reaches hermaphroditic wholeness, and finds genderless perfection. The form is identical, the means is not. Donald Cheney highlights that in antiquity, similar to the Renaissance, the Hermaphrodite is "represented either statically in the single figure or dynamically in the coupling of the wedded pair."¹⁴² Amoret and Venus's representation offers a beautiful example of both.

Una

Una, the female heroine of Book I of *Chastity*, cannot boast such multi-faced variety. By the time we first see her, she has already reached calm, settled serenity, which is reflected in her –apparently – modest, humble looks. The first lines that give account of

¹⁴¹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 176.

¹⁴² Donald Cheney, "Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 Faerie Queene," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* vol 87, number 2 (1972): 195.

Una's appearance.

A louely Ladie rode him faire beside,
Vpon a lowly Asse more white then snow,
Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
Vnder a vele, that wimpled was full low,
And ouer all a blacke stole she did throw,
As one that inly mournd: so was she sad,
And heaueie sat vpon her palfrey slow:
Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,
And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad.(I.i. 4.)

In this description two colours dominate: white and black. The extradiegetic narrator reveals that the dark veil conceals Una's white skin. A basic opposition can be detected between the dark surface (veil) and the whiteness underneath.

The depiction of Una appears to be noticeably sensuous: this female character is not only an abstract image, but also possesses a body. We are made aware of that through having our sight directed under Una's garment. However, the atmosphere of mild eroticism is soon annulled, her description continues in a rather matter-of-fact style, concentrating on concrete, visible elements. On this level again the basic motif is: the strong antithesis between black and white. Una's veil and scarf stand in contrast with the white animals accompanying her: she rides a white donkey and leads a white lamb on a leash.

At first sight the two beasts suggest opposing notions. The lamb universally evokes Christ, "as both suffering and triumphant,"¹⁴³ and also became the attribute "of the personifications of innocence, gentleness, patience and humility."¹⁴⁴ Another beast

¹⁴³ Cooper, *Traditional Symbols*, 94.

¹⁴⁴ Hull, *Subjects and Symbols*, 185-6. Also: Interestingly the image of a lamb arises another occasion in Renaissance art in connection with Saint George. Namely in the engraving of Marcus Gheeraerts which depicts William the Orange as Saint George killing the dragon. The hero in the centre is adjoined by a lady (probably the allegory of Belgium) who has a lamb at her side. The assassination of William the Orange caused serious distress in England in 1584, since Elizabeth having been excommunicated from the Catholic Church ceased to enjoy heavenly (ecclesiastic)

accompanying Una is a donkey. The animal is usually associated with lasciousness, even abnormal sexuality, bestiality. However, in Christian tradition, the ass acquired connotations of “humility, patience and courage,”¹⁴⁵ and was even associated with both Yahweh and Jesus,¹⁴⁶ whose significations colour Una’s character without in-depth psychological analysis.

Although Una’s beauty is carefully hidden, occasionally a few more intimate glimpses are shown. While strolling with Redcrosse she persistently wore her black veil, whereas when being left without guidance she exposes herself – although far from human sight:

From her faire head her fillet she vndight,
And laid her stole aside. Her angels face
As the great eye of heauen shyned bright,
And made a sunshine in the shadie place;
Did neuer mortall eye behold such haeuenly grace. (I.iii.4.)

Her exposed state does not remain without consequences: from the dark forest an outraged greedy lion emerges. However, the king of the animals acts in opposition to his instincts. Instead of tearing the princess apart, he is enchanted and tamed by her transcendental beauty. He quails, kisses her feet, licks her “lily hands,” an archetypal signifier of Renaissance refined beauty. The lion then stays with Una “with her went along,

protection, therefore was a potential victim of murder. (The murderer would not have to face retribution.) The figure of William the Orange was put up as a warning sign for the English queen. The parallel between Gheeraets’s engraving and *The Faerie Queene* is most probably not direct, however, Spenser was familiar with the work of the Dutch master. Jan van der Noot dedicated his work *The Theatre of Voluptuous Wordlings* to Elizabeth I. This collection of epigrams and sonnets was translated into English by Edmund Spenser. The Dutch edition contained merely the texts, whereas the English was illustrated with engravings by Gheeraets. (The pictures proved to be inspiring for Spenser: Duessa’s depiction as the Whore of Babylon on the seven-headed beast alludes to Noot’s epigram and Gheeraets’s picture.) Thus, the interesting phenomenon of Saint George’s co-appearance with a lady with a lamb shall be noted. Cf. Arthur M. Hind, *Engraving in England in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 121-122.

¹⁴⁵ Cirlot, *Dictionary*, 21.

¹⁴⁶ Cirlot, *Dictionary*, 21; Pál József, Újvári Edit, *Szimbólumtár: jelképek, motívumok, témák az egyetemes és a magyar kultúrából*, (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1997), 416.

as a strong gard / Of her chaste person, and a faithful mate... Still when she slept, he kept both watch and ward, / And when she waked, he waited diligent.” (I.iii.9)

The lion is a diverse symbol. Its most common traits are: majesty, strength, courage, justice, and military might. It can be both solar and lunar. Commonly referred to as the king of beasts, it is a symbol of Kingly power and might, but as lioness it is commonly related to the Great Mother and protection.

To tempt Redcrosse into sin, Archimago creates a “false Una,” whose depiction enforces our previous image of the real lady: “Her all in white he clad, and over it / Cast a blacke stole, most like to seeme for *Vna* fit.” (I.i.45)

From a former stanza we know that Una wears a black garment above “her whiteness”, however, in I.i.4. the implication is, that that “whiteness” was her skin, and only this strophe about the false Una disambiguates the issue. Here arises an intriguing question: the narrator evokes erotic-sensual thoughts while describing the chaste real Una, whereas during the depiction of the luscious creation this image is abandoned, ignored. Perhaps this is another example of the universal perception when unattainable women are more charming and tempting, than the easily accessible ones.

From another point of view this can also mean the embodiment of forbidden dreams of the knight. Through the depiction of the false Lady, the other – worldly – side of Una can be seen.

Florimell

With her emphatic and consistent appearance, and maddening pulchritude Florimell seemingly fits finely in the hall league of Spenserian beauties. However, her depiction is overshadowed by slight criticism. The condition in which Florimell is most

frequently seen, is being chased by a row of lustful men. During her flight her images capture her downfall (until she is saved by a fortunate marriage to Marinell). Upon first seeing her flee on her “milke-white Palfrey,” despite her visible fear she still bears traits of wealth and elegance. Her “face did eem a Chritall stone / And eke through feare as white as whales bone: / Her garments all were wrought of beaten gold, / And all her steed with tinsell trappings shone.” (III.i.15)

Her recurring attribute is her girdle, which also becomes important in its own right, since at Satyrane's tournament it stands for ultimate beauty. Universally a girdle “is a symbol of the protection of the body and, being an allegory of virginity implies the 'defensive' (moral) virtues of the person.”¹⁴⁷ In her constant, hectic fleeing Florimell loses the cestus, and parallel to that she increasingly becomes a target of seduction, and gets victimised. In fact, it was not the girdle which previously protected her from harassment, rather the opposite, her inability to keep the cestus is a sign of her incapability to maintain her eminence, to look after herself, to be independent. Paglia deeply condemns Florimell's, and dismisses her as foolhardy. “Florimell, brainwashed by the literary conventions of love-game, is a caricature of hysterical vulnerability (...) Florimell's timidity and irrational fear are a defect of will.”¹⁴⁸ She flees hastily and scattered, without being able to judge her situation properly.

Like as an Hynd forth singled from the heard,
That hath escaped from rauenous beast,
Yet flyes away of her owne feet affeard,
And euery leafe, that shaketh with the least
Murmure of winde, her terror hath encreast;
So fled faire Florimell from her vaine feare,
Long after she from perill was releast. (III.vii.1)

¹⁴⁷ Cirlot 24

¹⁴⁸ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 184.

She seems confused, feeble like a scared little animal, incapable of reaching her goal of finding Marinell. “Florimell's unmixed femininity makes her unfit for quest.”¹⁴⁹ Her appearance is impeccable, she even charms the steadfast Arthur. However, she lacks the halo-like glow and sharp contours which gives her character the iconic flatness and transcendentalism of major Spenserian heroines such as Britomart or Belphebe. Her image is two-dimensional, without the depth of originality. This is the reason why no one realises that Florimell's place is taken by a false Florimell created from snow. In this case, the copy is more beckoning than the original, she even “[m]ight fairer be” (III.viii.9). As Paglia poignantly, and aptly states, “[i]t is her impoverished lack of sexual complexity that allows a knock-off copy of her to be so easily fabricated.”¹⁵⁰ In the Florimell plotline the climax happens at Satyrane's tournament, when the two Florimells are confronted: “As when two sunnes appeare in the azure skye, /Mounted in Phoebus charet fierie bright” (V.iii.19). The two Florimells are each other's identical representations, both impeccable and immaculate. Falseness has no outer indicator. We have to rely on the magical object, the cestus to show the ultimate truth, since it “round about her tender waist fitted well,” (V. iii.27) what makes the false Florimell melt. The real one receives back her girdle, and with that socially approved, unquestionable chastity. Through these depictions a young lady is painted, who is endowed with all physical necessities, but lacks the dignity which would add that indefinable glow to the impeccable facade. However, on account of the detailed description of her beauty and its effect on other characteristics, her place is definitely among the grandiose Spenserian heroines.

¹⁴⁹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 187.

¹⁵⁰ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 187.

Medina

In *The Faerie Queene* Medina is the female character who meets the requirements of conduct books to the largest extent. Her courtesy, politeness, smooth manner and her attendance of Guyon as her guest display temperance, the dominant theme of the book. However, Medina's temperance is distinct from Guyon's, hers is a more communal variation of it. The characterization of Medina facilitates the further understanding of females, since it serves as a measure/gauge against which other - virtuous and lewd - women are measured.

A sober sad, and comely curteous Dame;
Who rich arayd, and yet in modest guise,
In goodly garments, that her well became,
Faire marching forth in honorable wize, / (...)
Ne in her speech, ne in her hauiour,
Was lightnesse seene, or looser vanitie,
But gracious wmanhood, and grauitie," (II.ii. 14, 15)

Wanton idleness is remote from her, "she her selfe (...) busily did frame." (II.ii.16) The constituents of a courteous woman are thus encapsulated: expensive clothing, hence a wealthy background; sense of taste, inner contentment, which manifests itself in blond braids; young yet wise; elaborate speech; femininity which lacks vanity and finally, constant occupation.

Mercilla

A unique and distinct large female figure of the romance is Queen Mercilla. In opposition to other heroines, regarding the plot she is relatively insignificant, whereas regarding the work itself she is not negligible. She is the opposite of Florimell's mobility,

she is static and dignified. Mercilla's emphatic appearance is in Book V canto ix, when she prepares for Duessa's trial. She is mentioned earlier by her messenger, Samient as "a mayden Queene of high renowne" (V.viii.17), but in person she only appears a canto later. This advent of hers begins with a grand-scale vision of her splendid surroundings, but after the depiction, instead of focusing more closely on the queen, she is seen again from the distance. Thus, none of her personal traits are seen clearly. She is mounted "Vpon a throne of gold full bright and sheene, / Adorned all with gemmes of endlesse price" (V.ix.27) which is embossed "with Lyons and with Flourdelice." The iconographic significance of these symbols is not to be overlooked. Thomas Roche defines them in his notes as "the insignia on the royal armes of England (the lion) and France (the fleur-de-lis). The two were combined in 1340 as a sign of King Edward III's claim to the French crown."¹⁵¹ In addition to being political symbols, both of the insignia are laden with artistic and religious connotations. While in Una's company the lion appeared as a protector, here he is subjugated. Hence, the connotations they evoke also differ. Mercilla's lions rather refer to "restrained force or perhaps hostile force kept in allegiance."¹⁵²

Cirlot describes the fleur-de-lis the following way: "As an emblem, its base is an inverted triangle representing water; above is a cross (...) with two additional and symmetrical leaves wrapped round the horizontal arm; the central arm is straight and reaches up heaven-wards, the symbolism being self-evident."¹⁵³ From the Middle Ages onwards the fleur-de-lis was associated with the Virgin Mary.¹⁵⁴ Through these attributes Mercilla is endowed with a number of associative traits. She obtains a complex amalgam of characteristics, which are power, femininity, virginity and transcendentality. Her

¹⁵¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1203.

¹⁵² Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 469.

¹⁵³ Cirlot, *Dictionary*, 108.

¹⁵⁴ Cooper, *Traditional Symbols*, 98.

clothing is cosmic and dainty:

All ouer her a cloth of state was spred,
Not of rich tissey, nor of cloth of gold,
Nor of ought else, that may be richest red,
But like a cloud, as likest may be told,
That her brode spreading wings did wyde vnfold;
Whose skirts were borden with bright sunny beams,
Glistring like gold, amongst the plights enrold,
And here and there shooting forth siluer streames,
Mongst which crept little Angels through the glittering gleames.” (V. ix. 28)

This image of Mercilla evokes Hilliard’s engraving of Elizabeth on her heavenly throne. Precious materials are listed, but their rejection suggests that Mercilla’s dress surpasses earthly vanities. Around her angels sing “Hymnes to high God, and carols heauenly things” (V.ix.29), and Mercilla herself also looks “Angel-like.” The next stanza balances the refined imagery with its masculine regal objects: she is “Holding a Scepter in her royall hand” and “at her feet her sword was likewise layde, / Whose long rest rusted the bright steely brand.”¹⁵⁵ (V.ix.30) These stanzas of Mercilla’s appearance are remarkable in their minute description of her clothes. Paolucci’s attention was also captured by these close-ups: “Rich linen, silk, quilted satin, robes of soft, shimmering gold sparkling with spangles and half-hidden threads of precious metal catch Spenser’s eye and engross his attention. His descriptions of such garments are among the best of the entire poem.”¹⁵⁶

The location of Mercilla’s assembly room is somewhat ambiguous. Earthly men, like Artegall and Arthur attend the trial, whereas the queen appears as if she resided in a transcendental world. However, in the world of the romance this does not necessarily create a dichotomy. Her majesty’s mannerist glow can be due to her exceptional inner qualities, social state (“heyre of ancient kings”) and power. These attributes – as Richard F.

¹⁵⁵ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 469: “The rusty sword suggests the ancient sword Elizabeth kept as a reminder of the peace of her reign.”

¹⁵⁶ Paolucci, *Women*, 28.

Hardin suggests – strongly connect Mercilla to Christianity: “The clouds, sun, and angels in the portrait place the origins of mercy-tempered justice in heaven, suggesting also the biblical ‘mercy seat’ of God covering the Ark.”¹⁵⁷ This way, Mercilla’s plot-wise weightless figure obtains iconographical significance and her portrayal eclipses the rest of the characters.

Viewing the portraits of Elizabeth, apparent similarities can be detected between the hair of the Spenserian heroines and the queen. The reason for this resemblance might be supposed to be that the poet created his female figures with his ruler in mind. However, the explanation behind the constant appearance of fair haired women is because of the influence of the renaissance aesthetics of blonde women, under which both Spenser and contemporary painters were in awe of. This trend was commensurate with the queen's wish, who meticulously supervised her portrayals to ensure her favourable delineation. "As early as 1563, Elizabeth felt it necessary to regulate the production of her portraits. In that year, a draft proclamation recommended the idea of pattern pictures, which would be approved before their release to the painters' workshop."¹⁵⁸

In addition to the officially regulated paintings and miniatures, a few verbal portraits also give account of her looks. It is rather telling that despite the fact that her hair was auburn, in her English courtiers' description she appears as fair haired,¹⁵⁹ whereas a certain Sir James Melville from the court of Mary Queen of Scots describes the English

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 469.

¹⁵⁸ Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 39: “Later, at an uncertain date, we find Sir Richard Baker confirming that alliance of mind and face noted in the Princess portrait: ‘She was of stature indifferent tall, slender and straight; fair of complexion; her hair inclining to pale yellow.’” Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 40: “Certain details are reinforced also by one Fuller, and observer at Court: ‘She was of person tall; of hair and complexion fair.’”

queen as her “hair was more reddish than yellow.”¹⁶⁰ The same report of Melville notes Elizabeth's vain curiosity about the Scottish queen's looks: “She desired to know of me, what colour of hair was reputed best; and whether my Queen's hair or hers was best.” From these lines the importance of hair quality and colour can be gleaned. The substitution of the colour red with fair and auburn in both portrays and texts, is not accidental, since it was associated with witchcraft and lusciousness.¹⁶¹

ii. Temptresses

So far we have witnessed the romance's majestic women, but Spenser's keen interest was not confined to exemplary, virtuous women. His descriptions of ostensibly beautiful temptresses are similarly alluring.

Radigund

When Artegall glimpses the Amazons, from the distance he does not suppose that he sees women: “he spiede / A rout of many people farre away.” (V.iv.21) Only when he goes to their vicinity can he – to his great surprise – realise that the people “ready for to fight” (V.iv.21) are females. As he moves even closer he witnesses a man, being sadistically humiliated by these armed ladies: “with both his hands behinde him pinnoed hard, / And round about his necke an halter tight, / (...) / His face was couered, and his head was bar'd.” (V.iv.22) The narrator didactically condemns not only the Amazons, but

¹⁶⁰ Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 39.

¹⁶¹ Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990), 243; J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Eycyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 41.

also Terpine for letting himself captured by warrior women. Nevertheless the way this is presented is so enticing and rife with suppressed sexual energy that it has exactly the opposite effect than the didactic words seemingly want to achieve.

This perspective of the Amazons resembles the one-long-take technique applied in films: without cuts the camera moves around imitating the natural movement of the human eye, and upon approaching a person of interest it focuses on her. In this scene the main focus is Radigund, who serves a fine example of the attractive female temptress. “A Princesse of great power, and greater pride, / And Queene of Amazons, in arms well tride.” (V.iv.33).

Radigund’s first full appearance on the battle day is festive, majestic, attractive and intimidating. From her expressive depiction we get an ekphrasis-like picture:

All in a Camis light of purple silke
Wouen vpon with siluer, subtly wrought,
And quilted vpon sattin white as milke,
Trayled with ribbands diuersly distraught
Like as the workeman had their courses taught;
Which was short tucked for light motion
Vp to her ham, but when she list, it raught
Downe to her lowest heele, and thereuppon
She wore for her defence a mayled habergeon.
And on her legs she painted buskins wore,

Basted with bends of gold on euery side,
And mailles betweene, and laced close afore:
Vpon her thigh her Cemitare was tide,
With an embrodered belt of mickell pride;
And on her shoulder hung her shield, bedeckt
Vpon the bosse with stones, that shined wide,
As the faire Moone in her most full aspect,
That to the Moone it mote be like in each respect. (V.v.2-3)

The dominant colour of her garment is purple, the colour of royalty and nobility,

but also of the pope,¹⁶² thus – in Spenser’s world – of betrayal. This ambiguity is commensurate with Radigund’s puzzling portrayal. Paglia remarks that “[w]ith Radigund, that strange glittering light returns to the poem after an absence of a book and a half”¹⁶³ – a similarly shimmering light was previously emanating from Belpheobe. Radigund’s attributes definitely evoke the semi-goddess’s image: the buskins, the purple-white tunic, shining jewelleries and the reference to the moon. “The description deliberately recalls Belpheobe. But Radigund, ‘halfe like a man,’ is a bully.”¹⁶⁴

Her outfit is functional but feminine. The words describing her are so plastic and sensuous that they trigger male fantasies. Although in opposition to Belpheobe’s description, Radigund’s body is not glimpsed upon. The narrator resists penetrating her garment, and revealing her beauty, he rather preserves her suppressed femininity. Nevertheless, her outfit is described in detail: her silk costume with its unique cut, the embroidered belt, which is synesthetically proud, a highly masculine symbol: her cemitare which is tied to her thighs, and her shield trimmed with precious stones. She is an exciting amalgam of masculine strength and cruelty and feminine beauty and enticement.

Her royal dwelling place is not customary: traditionally Amazons live close to nature as brutal instinctive creatures. We have been informed that Radigund is not a classic archetypal Amazon: she is not natural born, but has acquired this persona. Thus it is believable that her environment does not conform to any stereotype either: she is an urban warrior woman. Her place is “A goodly citty and a mighty one, / The which of her owne name she called Radegone.” (V.iv.35) One’s indigenous home is not only a place to live, it forms one’s personality, determines it. Hence an urban Amazon is expected to bear distinct traits from a forest-dweller. Her outfit is civilised, fashionable and refined, the customary

¹⁶² Pál, *Szimbólumtár*, 75.

¹⁶³ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 183.

¹⁶⁴ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 183.

Amazonian fur and leather are left behind.

Phaedria

Similarly to Radigund, Phaedria also dwells in an enclosed place: on an island surrounded by water. She first appears first in Book II canto vi. Despite some subtle deprecation here she is presented fairly amiably. Her basic characteristics are “fresh and faire” (II.vi.3), but she finds delight in “vaine toyes” (II.vi.7), and “Sometimes her head she fondly would aguize / With gaudie girlonds, or fresh flowrets dight / About her necke, or rings of rushes plight;” (II.vi.7). She is depicted casually floating with her boat on a spacious lake. Water in its uncontrolled, amorphous form is a feminine symbol, representing the universal maternal womb, a fertile material containing chaos and all the potentials of the cosmos.¹⁶⁵ Her sweet-smelling fertile island is a beautiful projection of Phaedria’s inner self: “Trees, braunches, birds, and songs were framed fit, / For to allure fraile mind to carelesse ease,” (II.vi.13) freedom, light-heartedness, temptation and refinement characterise both.

Guyon’s second encounter depicts Phaedria from a different point of view: she does not seem elegant or gentle anymore. She is rude, harsh, and provocative. She chases Guyon with her “litle skippet” (II.xii.14), loudly laughing, and wantonly leaving “her locks vndight” (II.xii.15). In this canto she only has only a brief appearance, as though she only came back on the scene to destroy her glowing, charming image presented in canto vi. As if her portrait had been too flattering previously, as if she had charmed the narrator, who apparently found much delight in describing her – so she had to be called back, to annihilate her former glamour and to add dark farcical and sarcastic overtones to her so far

¹⁶⁵ Pál, *Szimbólumtár*, 492.

shining character.

Acrasia

As Guyon enters the Bower of Bliss he encounters female characters who could be defined as different variations of the same theme, the dangerously pleasant temptress. Excess is the first in this row. On the porch of the Bower, which “Archt ouer head with an embracing vine” (II. xii. 54) “a comely dame did rest, / Clad in faire weedes, but fowle discorded, / And garments loose, that seemd vnmeet for womanhed.” (II.xii.55) Even at first sight, the judgement is made: this woman is not respectable. Her inactivity and especially her careless clothing make the narrator condemn her. And indeed, the luscious appearance infers provocative behaviour. No word is uttered, and thus Excess’s symbolically sexual behaviour has an even stronger, more chthonian and lawless ambiance: “In her left hand a Cup of gold she held, / And with her right the riper fruit did reach, / Whole sappy liquor, that with fulnesse sweld, / Into her cup she scruzd.” (II.xii.56) Squeezing a ‘masculine’ swollen bunch of grapes into a ‘feminine’ container is suggestive enough to embarrass Guyon, the knight of temperance, and wake him from his habitual, chronic calmness. Bender aptly defines the pictorial technique employed in here as continuous narrative style, since “The stanza presenting the lady does not contain any action in any normal sense, since she eternally squeezes grapes into her golden cup and at the same time eternally offers it to the passing stranger.”¹⁶⁶ Excess’s depiction captures her unmotivated, archetypal seductiveness, which is wickedly and enticingly perilous by its effortless eternity.

¹⁶⁶ John B. Bender, *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 185.

Guyon's most sensual pre-Acrasian experience takes place at the entrance of the infamous Bower: in the centre of the garden "a fountaine stood" (II.xii.60) and "Two naked Damzelles he therein espied." (II.xii.63) The minute description of these girls constitutes the most erotically heated part of the romance. There are depictions of other tempting ladies, but these girls under scrutiny represent pure temptation and beauty without disillusionment. The damsels "wrestle wantonly, ne car'd to hyde" (II.xii.63) "their snowy limbes, as through a vele, / So through the Christall waues appeared plaine" (II.xii.64), they loosen their hair, which with Spenser is always a sign of erotic potential. They do not emanate evil seduction, rather naïve fresh sexuality. When they glimpse Guyon one of them hides, but the other one exposes her naked body.

And her two lilly paps aloft displayed,
 And all, that might his melting hart entise
 To her delights, she vnto him bewrayd:
 The rest hid underneath, him more desirous made.
 With that, the other likewise vp arose." (II.xii.66, 67)

As Paglia remarks about the intensity of this image, "[t]he partly concealed naked bodies of the (...) damsels in the Bower of Bliss are attractive symbols of lust. The reader is made conscious of this by the minute attention given to the description of the purely sexual parts of the female anatomy."¹⁶⁷

With Spenser, refined countenance often mirrors precious inner qualities. On this account, the two bathing girls are puzzling: their virtuously blushing "loully" faces (II.xii.67)— in spite of their nakedness and enticing smiles, suggest innocence. The girls have "snowy limbes" (II.xii.64) and "faire lockes" (II.xii.67) which traits otherwise only characterise virtuous, chaste females. On this account they are even compared to "Cyprian goddesse, newly borne." (II.xii.65) The Botticellian female image satisfies the renaissance

¹⁶⁷ Paolucci, *Women*, 24.

female ideal - here strangely manifest in dubious characters. This episode with its complex and opposing aesthetical qualities is highly intriguing. The amalgam of sin and chastity, and the fluctuation between exposure and concealment raise excitement and tension, which are – exceptionally – maintained here: it is neither satiated, nor destroyed. Hence, when we first encounter Acrasia we are already full of expectation, especially because her appearance resembles the bathing damsels, thus she lures with satisfaction.

After long anticipation (since Acrasia has been talked about since the initial cantos of Book II), the reader glimpses the enchantress only in canto xii. She appears in her full statue as an inert beauty resting next to her "Fountain of Impure Love,"¹⁶⁸ at the centre of her garden, whose drops of water seem to spread and intensify Acrasia's irresistible charm. Whoever reaches the core of the Bower is bound to be captured by the enchantress:

Vpon a bed of Roses she was layd,
As faint through heat, or dight to pleasant sin,
And was arayd, or rather disarayd,
All in a vele of silke and siluer thin,
That hid no whit her alabaster skin,
But rather shewd more white, if more might bee:
More sutile web Arachne can not spin. (II.xii.77)

Her description is a strange amalgam of condemnable traits and elements of respectable demeanour. Roses, alabaster skin, and the fine veil all suggest delicateness and ease. Pleasant sin, nakedness, translucent garments refer to a level of eroticism which surpasses the border of conventional (and Spenserian) docility. As McManus remarks "Acrasia's use of the veil as an incitement to desire is probably the most egregious example in the poem. She employs, instead of her hair or the blush, a literal veil, yet one

¹⁶⁸ Edmund Spenser, *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Frederrick Morgan Padelford et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932), vol. ii. 382.

that is diaphanous, thus mocking the conventions of modesty.”¹⁶⁹

The following lines about the young knight, Verdant’s seduction intensify the erotic ambiance:

[Acrasia’s] snowy breast was bare to readie spoyle
Of hungry eies, which n’ote therewith be fild,
and yet through languor of her late sweet toyle,
Few drops, more cleare then Nectar, forth distild,
That like pure Orient perles adowne it trild (II.xii.78).

Curiously, one of the most erotic scenes in the romance is depicted with such ease, elegance, and is devoid of the usual moral lecturing. Despite all the lusciousness, heavy condemnation does not intersperse the lines, in the course of the portrayal, the judgement about Acrasia is left to the audience, they can watch and enjoy the scene without being disturbed by voices of rejection, and they can form an opinion by themselves.

Some elements of Acrasia’s exquisite physical refinement intriguingly makes her resemble the chaste Belpheobe, thus making her dubious figure even more perplexing. The most conspicuous of these facets is the rose-symbolism through which not only Belpheobe but also Acrasia is described. When the enchantress lies on a rose bed (II.xii.77), we hear her carpe diem song: “Ah see the Virgin Rose, how sweetly shee / Doth first peepe forth with bashfull modestee, / That fairer seems, the lesse ye see her may;” (II.xii.74). According to Miller, “[e]verything in the Bower (...) ‘fairer seems, the lesse ye see her may’: alternations of concealment and display or initiation and delay are the essence of Acrasia’s tantalising art.”¹⁷⁰ In this case the rose epitomises the suggestive game of concealment and display, which is very similar to what we see in the Belpheobe imagery in

¹⁶⁹ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 180.

¹⁷⁰ Miller, *Two Bodies*, 228-9.

III.v.51, although in Acrasia's instance the amplitude between hiding and revealing is significantly greater than in Belpheobe's case of milder ambiguity.

Duessa

In the romance, there is only one temptress who can exceed Acrasia's vile behaviour, and that is Duessa, the most consistently evil persona in the Spenserian fairy world. She is also the most protean: no other character has the ability to appear in such a variety of guises and forms as her. Thus if we examine her different alter egos, we will know everything about *The Faerie Queene's* villainesses. She debuts as Fidessa, Sansfoy's allegedly seduced lady. Her outfit is rich and lavish, suggesting her immorality: "A goodly Lady clad in scarlot red, / Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay, / And like a *Persian* mitre on her hed / She wore, with crownes and owhes garnished." (I.ii.13) When Redcrosse encounters Fidessa he suspects nothing. Her invented miseries evoke sympathy in the knight: "faire Lady hart of flint would rew / The vnderserued woes and sorrowes, which ye shew." (I.ii.26) Redcrosse is so captivated by Fidessa's beauty, that her revealing words remain unheard by him: "More busying his quicke eyes, her face to view, / Then his dull eares, to heare what she did tell." Even when the bleeding trees warn him of a certain "sorceresse," he fails to suspect his protégée. (I.ii.30-31)

As Thomas Roche states in his textual notes for *The Faerie Queene*, Duessa initially appears as the Scarlet Whore of Babylon.¹⁷¹ And as Kaske explains "her biblical model, the Whore of Babylon, represents the Roman Catholic Church."¹⁷² She rides the seven-headed beast of the Revelations: "I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast,

¹⁷¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1080.

¹⁷² Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 87.

full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.”¹⁷³ Her excessive jewellery and especially the Episcopal hat make the allusions explicit. In the House of Pride she rides right next to Lucifera, queen of the Underworld. In Orgoglio's castle she seduces even the disgusting giant, in return for what he lavishes her with goods. “He gaue her gold and purple pall to weare, / And triple crowne set on her head full hie, / And endowd with royall maiestye” (I.vii.16) In her purple robe and ternary crown, symbolising synthesis of powers,¹⁷⁴ Duessa is once again presented as manifestation of hated Catholicism, and thus, Orgoglio is Lucifera's double. The images are similar, but not identical. They refer to similar contents, but are identical. In Rosemond Tuve's interpretation “[t]here is no repetition in Book I except as men eternally repeat the First sin, never recognizing it again when they see it.”¹⁷⁵

Duessa, a master of deception easily manages to con Sir Guyon with her demure countenance and victim-like hue. Seeing a “gentle Lady all alone, / With garments rent, and haire discheueled/ (...) / And her faire face with teares (...) fowly blubbered,” (II.i.13) makes him believe that the Redcrosse Knight raped her. Here Duessa depicted as amiable, in opposition to the overwhelming power and allurement of her usual *femme fatale*-self, now she entices with her softer, more feminine side. The Knight of Holiness, a lively crusader is cajoled with matching dynamism – even aggression, whereas the knight of Temperance with emotions and slyly luring vulnerability. At Satyrane's tournament she is introduced at the side of Paridell, in the illustrious company of Cambina, Canacee, Amoret, as one of the noble, virtuous ladies. Here the narrator is extradiegetic, he knows about the enchantress's false beauty and misdemeanour: “with her forged beautie did seduce / The

¹⁷³ Revelations 17.3

¹⁷⁴ Cirlot, *Dictionary*, 262.

¹⁷⁵ Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966), 108

hearts of some, that fairest her did weene.” (IV.v.11) Paolucci rounds up Duessa’s depictions with emphasising the employed imagery:

The artistic ingenuity in Spenser’s delineation of Duessa may best be appreciated in the chimerical quality of the representation. The sorceress is repeatedly portrayed in vivid, pictorial fashion. (...) The rich details of dress, the elaborate trappings reminiscent of Persian luxury, are meant to suggest the kind of immediate fascination she exerts on the spectator.¹⁷⁶

There is only one male, Arthur, the destined lover of Gloriana, who has the sturdiness to look behind the attractive surface. Fairly early in the course of the romance, Arthur ruthlessly strips Duessa displaying her real repelling body.

Her craftie head was altogether bald, / (...)
Her teeth out of her rotten gummes were feld,
And her sowre breath abhominably smeld;
Her dried dugs, like bladders lacking wind,
Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;
Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind. (I.viii.47)

After this anti-blazon it is difficult to imagine that Duessa’s most successful temptations are yet to come. Especially bearing in mind the next stanza, which is so outrageous that it provokes an aside from the narrator: “Her neather parts, the shame of all her kind, / My chaster Muse for shame doth blush to write” (I.viii.48) In the *Variorum* Upton cites Revelations 13.2 suggesting that the foxtail signifies craftiness.¹⁷⁷ As for Paglia, the narrator “seems to give the most depraved female evil a penis.”¹⁷⁸ Although the stanza goes on with defining the abhorrent nether part as a “foxes taile,” (I. viii. 48) Paglia’s interpretation is not to be discarded. The difference between the two interpretations is only whether we assume the fox’s tail as a euphemism for a male sexual

¹⁷⁶ Paolucci, *Women*, 62-63.

¹⁷⁷ Spenser, *Variorum*, ii. 263,

¹⁷⁸ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 337.

organ, or regard it as merely a loosely evocative image of it, but the cognitive outcome is the same.

Duessa's talent lies in her ability to choose the right appearance and right ambiance to provoke her victims. Even at the crucial final trial she is able to control her gestures. Although at this stage her vileness is known by the public, Duessa's outer beauty is not tarnished by it: the facade and her true character are in a distinct – generally perceived – dichotomy. "A Ladie of great countenance and place, / But that she it with foule abuse did marre; / Yet did appeare rare beautie in her face / But blotted with condition vile and base." (V.ix.38) Queen Mercilla is neither touched by Duessa's tears, nor enticed by her beauty, and has her executed.

Spenser's interest in bad women seems to be just as keen as in the virtuous. Looking at and comparing female portraits of this group, we can deduce that two main patterns exist in this world for dangerous women: firstly, the more dominant group: the beautiful, erotic enchantresses, and secondly, the repelling, evil hags. There are examples of minute description for both, but numbers indicate that pulchritude triggered more indulgence than hideousness. The reason for this can be of philosophical or dramaturgical nature. While ugliness only served as a simple deterrent, the dangers of pleasurable looks are more complex, thus needing more examples to demonstrate their potential jeopardy through its different manifestations. An additional, and more speculative reason that the enchantress portrayals outnumber the hags' both in number and extent, may be that the author found more delight in depicting attractive bodies. Due to this, villainesses' images express their complex nature in their very distinct ways. In their meticulous descriptions positive and negative traits intermingle creating their unique and loaded pictures.

iii. Middle women

Nevertheless, the Spenserian world is inhabited by numerous women, many of whom are not portrayed with meticulous care, only with rough brushwork, through sketches of their most conspicuous traits. They are neither evil, nor extraordinarily virtuous. They are the closest to being modern, ordinary, human women. None of them are immaculate but all of them welcome benevolence.

Amavia's appearance and presence offers a unique voice in the romance, which tone is especially conspicuous because of her position in the romance: plotwise she is the first middle woman in the romance (appearing in Book II). Her portrayal is not detailed, blazon-like. We are rather given an overall picturesque image. It is her physical condition which moves the knight, resulting in a deeply sensuous, barbarically erotic and decadent depiction of Amavia's death.

And soone arriued, where that sad pourtraict
Of death and dolour lay, halfe dead, halfe quicke,
In whose with alabaster brest did sticke
A cruell knife, that made a grisly wound,
From which forth gusht a streame of gorebloud thick,
That all her goodly garments staine around,
And into a deepe sanguine dide the grassie ground. (II.i.39)

White breasts are the weak spots of Spenser (and his male knights): attractive appearance is a reflection of worthy, chaste soul, and one of the most notable of these outer features is the "snowy breast." Normally it is contrasted with rosy cheeks, however, as the quoted lines above reveal Amavia's "alabaster brest," it is highlighted by her "streame of gorebloud thick". The flow of blood implies physical force and dynamism, which stand in

strong opposition with the clam, chaste, still image of the chest. The opposing adjectives create a strange, serenely violent image of her.

In opposition to the other parts, Book VI of *Courtesy* is abundant in earthly, sinful, but not inherently bad females. The reason for this is the theme of this book. *Courtesy* is a virtue whose violation is not a deadly sin, but a sin against civilised society, often relating to man-woman relationships.

Characteristically to middle women Priscilla's appearance is not specified, we cannot make a mental image of her: we are offered no information of her hue, her complexion, her celestial beauty is not celebrated. However, there are clues suggesting her favourable, attractive looks. We are told that a knight, while walking with her lady, upon seeing Priscilla suddenly lusts after her, so pushes his own lady off his horse, and attempts to get hold of Priscilla. The suspicion of Priscilla's delicacy is strengthened by the abandoned lady's narration: she understands and almost approves of her being deserted for such a graceful woman: "Faire was the Ladie sure, that mote content / An heart," (VI.ii.16) "Whom when my knight did see so louely faire, / He inly gan her louer to enuy." (VI.ii.17)

Serena another woman of dubious morals is first seen as having a suggestive "rest" with her jolly knight, Calepine. At this occasion we only get to know that "the Lady was full faire to see, / And courteous withall, becomming her degree." (VI.iii.20) A more exhaustive picture of her is given by the cannibalistic savage men: as they are getting ready to sacrifice and devour on her, they closely look at her supposedly delicious body parts, resulting in a most grotesque blazon: "Some with their eyes the daintest morsels chose; / Some praise her paps, some praise her lips and nose." (VI.viii.39) After stripping her, they observe her bodily parts with "lustfull fantasyes:"

Her yuorie necke, her alabaster brest,
Her paps, which like silken pillowes were,

For loue in soft delight thereon to rest;
 Her tender sides, her bellie white and clere,
 Which like an Altar did it selfe vprere,
 To offer sacrifice diuine thereon;
 Her goodly thighes, whose glorie did appeare
 Like triumphall Arch, and thereupon
 The spoiles of Princes hang'd, which were in battel won." (VI.viii.42)

What is really interesting here is not the set of similes mostly based on courtly conventions, but the point of view. As stated above, here we are supposed to see Serena through the eyes of the cannibals, which we do in the cited stanza 39. However, later, in stanza 42 the words become more refined than we could expect from the savage, and the objects serving as vehicles for comparison evoke civilised, courtly life. Silk pillows, altars, arches, princes suggest the gushing words being the narrator's. Here again, he gets so indulged in and enthralled by female flesh that his enthusiasm overwrites the words which would sound logical and consistent in the given context from a certain character (like Acrasia or the fountain nymphs from Guyon' perspective). After this extreme situation we only see Serena briefly: she is rescued, however, she is sordid and lack-lustre: she feels too ashamed to reveal herself to her beloved knight, because "she [is] in so vnwomanly a mood," (VI.viii.50) she rather lets the benevolent darkness of the night hide her squalor.

Apropos of conception of a child, Serena's and Matilde's story intertwines, or rather, Matila's destiny becomes the continuation and solution of Serena's. No explicit words elucidate Matilde's appearance. We only know that she is crying and lamenting. Adjectives describing her only refer to her deep sadness felt upon her barrenness: "wofull" (VI.iv.27) "lamentable" (VI.iv.29). There is only one indicator of her respectability and favourable looks, when Calepine addresses her as "faire Dame" (VI.iv.34). She seems as if she was weeping eternally, - first out of desperation, then out of joy. In the Matilde-episode, the central topic is her incapability to conceive, and the fortuitous discovery of the

foundling. He is carried in the jaws of a bear, saved by Calepine, and given to Matilde and Bruin, the blissful foster parents. The image of the baby in the beast's mouth recalls Serena's similar appearance in the Blatant Beast's muzzle. As McManus notices "[t]he parallel of the bear carrying the infant between bloody jaws and the Blatant Beast carrying the bleeding Serena suggests that in rescuing the child the unarmed Calepine somehow also assists his lady."¹⁷⁹ The same image occurs twice in close vicinity, but with different outcome: Calepine was unable to protect his loved one, but he could free the child, thus rectifying his first mistake.

Similarly to Matilde, we have almost no reference to Blandina's appearance. The only suggestion is made as she hides her husband, Turpine under her skirt from Arthur's – lawful – revenge.

...when the Ladie saw, with great affright
She starting vp, began to shrieke aloud,
And with her garment couering him from sight,
Seem'd vnder her protection him to shroud;
And falling lowly at his feet, her bowd
Vpon her knee, intreating him for grace." (VI.vi.31)

On account of her assistance to Turpine, Blandina could be dismissed as malicious, nevertheless, her loyalty and passion towards the errant knight exempt her from the charge. Her main motif is love, not turpitude. The quoted stanza exemplifies her amorous sentiments: her way of protecting her husband is that of utmost intimacy. She saves him by embracing him with her whole body; she symbolically incubates him, thus offering the strongest possible sense of caring and protection to him.

Briana's story is akin: her haughtiness derives from her loved-one's arrogance: his condition of marrying her is a mantle lined with human hair. Briana's demeanour is not

¹⁷⁹ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 207.

defined precisely, only a golden ring is mentioned, which has to be sent to her fiancée, Crudor in case of emergency, and that she also has her dwarf for henchman. The circular object represents heaven and perfection with the transcendental tone eternity.¹⁸⁰ The ring also symbolises power, dignity, sovereignty, and strength,¹⁸¹ and in Irish tradition it is a source of proving identity. Here, bestowing the ring may add an amalgam of meanings from transference of power to recognition. On the other hand, the dwarf is an ambiguous signifier. They are “personifications of those forces which remain virtually outside the orbit of consciousness.”¹⁸² A dwarf being Crudor’s and Briana’s messenger shows their commitment to a base bodily, perfunctory world.

Though not impeccable, Briana’s and Blandina’s sins are definitely exceeded by Mirabella. When we first see her, almost no sign refers to her glamorous past. In her miserable state only the “faire” adjective attests that she has a modicum of physical beauty. Otherwise her “mourning weed” and her “mangy iade” (=inferior horse) do not suggest high class. Even more humiliating is that she is deprived of free-will by a halfwit: “a lewd foole her leading thorough dry and wet.” (VI.vi.16) Ironically, from the distance, Mirabella could be almost mistaken for Una: a female figure dressed in black on a palfrey lead by a dwarf. Although many books divide the two scenes, Una’s image was so emphatic that Mirabella’s sight automatically evokes Una reminiscences, thus shedding ironic light on her.

Among the generally ambiguous middle women, probably Hellenore is the most equivocal character. She is not one of the ladies from Book VI, who violate the rules of courtesy, she appears in Book III of Chastity to counterweigh the book’s thematic virtue. She is not a threat to law and order as Duessa, however, she is not free of sin either: she is

¹⁸⁰ Circlot, *Dictionary*, 46.

¹⁸¹ Pál, *Szimbólumtár*, 175-176.

¹⁸² Circlot, *Dictionary*, 91.

culpable of adultery, lewdness and bestial lust. Regardless of the hints about Hellenore's wantonness at the very beginning of Book III canto ix, when the reader first sees her, one can still be deceived and carried away with the forthcoming depiction of her physique.

She also dofte her heauy haberion,
which the faire feature of her limbs did hyde,
And her well plighted frock, which she did won
To tucke about her short, when she did ryde,
She low let fall, that flowd from her lanck syde
Downe to her foot, with carelesse modestee.
Then of them all she plainly was espyde,
To be a woman wight, vnwist to bee,
The fairest woman wight, that euer eye did see." (III.ix.21).

The narrator exempts himself from the responsibility of the portrayal by gradually shifting the perspective onto Paridell and Satyrane, the knights who so far are not aware of the Lady's lusciousness. However, her wide hips, and the short tucked-in skirt suggest sexual receptiveness and erotic overtones.

In Spenser's perception it seems two kinds of women can be interesting. The transcendental Botticelli-like immaculate beauty and the carnal, wicked, but attractive temptress. The first has an effect on the senses: her aesthetic qualities elevate the mind to angelic heights, her body – mostly – offers climax and catharsis without sexual overtones, purely based on exclusive, high-class purifying, celestial beauty and perfection.

The other group, which receives much attention in the romance in terms of appearance, are teasing enchantresses. As far as their bodies are concerned they share the traits of celestial women. However, the attitude which is combined with it is utterly distinct: they all aim to tempt, enchant and overpower. They represent a threat to law and order, they can upset the establishment, they can acquire power. They are supported by

natural powers or even forces of the underworld. Similarly, to their heavenly counterparts they sparkle, but their glow is not the emanation of inner benevolence, but of excitement and lust. However, at first glimpse, judging by their beauty, they look alike.

Spenser definitely handles these women with care and deep interest in their bodily appearances. Pagila warns us of the perils of indulgence. “The voyeurism of *The Faerie Queene*, endangering the poem itself, arises from the problem of sensuous beauty, which can lead the soul toward good or evil.”¹⁸³ With its keen preoccupation with beautiful bodies – although allegedly described to warn the reader – the romance is in danger of embodying passions it otherwise disapproves of.

However, there is another group in the romance, where most female characters belong. After the first reading of the *Faerie Queene*, this statement might sound striking, since most of us probably cannot recall these females. Although they are numerous, as far as their textual appearances are concerned they are outnumbered by the major heroines. Women of this latter group do not stick in our minds. They are drawn only with large brushwork, they are only sketches. Their bodies are not exciting in a conventional way, only grotesquely, perversely. Only one dimension of their character is emphasised, a trait which fits in the concept of a certain book or principle, but in themselves these women are not manifestations of any exemplary virtue. There is no pressure on their character to prove anything vital, they can just be affable frail women. The way they look is rather unimportant, not many words are wasted on their portrayal. However, they shall not be dismissed as utterly bland and flawed. If we look at their figure from another point of view and attempt to investigate what is hidden between the lines, an interesting world of earthly women can be discovered.

If we analyse Spenserian women from the aspect of their sexual behaviour and

¹⁸³ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 190.

their attitude to sex and to the other gender, we might be able to draw different conclusions from what we gleaned so far. Are the celestial beauties really that alluring? In what does the power of temptresses lie? Are women of the middle ground really merely sketches? Such questions may be answered through a thorough textual analysis of sexual behavioural patterns.

IV. Behaviour

Since fictional personae are manifestations of values, character is often the focus of genre-centric literary analysis.¹⁸⁴ In epic, the protagonist has gone through a long process of development, but always had a static moral significance. Spenser sketches his generic context when he relates Arthur to previous examples of “a good governor and a virtuous man.”¹⁸⁵ This technique generally applies not only to Arthur, but all major characters. We have seen this lack of psychological fundament and motivation through the course of talking about their appearances, and the same can be noticed when examining character: without an insight provided into the depth of their thoughts, characters are only accessible through their actions and manners. Yet, the lack of analytical remarks does not mean that the characters are schematically allegorical, merely that readers should deduce their own opinion about certain figures from the text rather than relying on the narrator’s ready-made descriptions. Hence, reading the romance carefully can display that there are numerous references hidden in the text which reveal both the characters’ state of mind, and the romance’s attitude towards certain sexual behaviour.

Due to the emphasis on virtues and virtuous characters, after a first reading, *The Faerie Queene* usually sticks in one’s mind as an ephemeral, asexual work. Nevertheless behind that polished surface, the romance is inherently imbued with a strong sexuality. The range of this eroticism expands from frustrated suppression through consumed passion to weird and extreme sexual practices. As Paglia’s witty remark summarises in the Spenser Encyclopedia “*The Faerie Queene* is the most extended and extensive meditation on sex in

¹⁸⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*; Fletcher, *Allegory*; Spenser, *Variorum*, II. 210: C.G. Osgood: "Some have said in their haste that Spenser cannot portray character. Among many other instances they overlook Satyrane and Braggadocchio.

¹⁸⁵ Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 68.

the history of poetry.”¹⁸⁶ This meditation can sustain interest throughout the more than a thousand pages due to its abundance of many opposing sexual traditions. It incorporates the Protestant, the courtly, the pagan, and the pastoral worlds, the conglomerate of which intriguingly keep the work in flux. It is impossible to harmonise and harness all of these different voices, especially because Spenser does not want to cross a certain border; he wants to keep on the safe side, in Paglia’s words he “wants to cleanse the procreative of its daemonic taint. (...) It [*The Faerie Queene*] tries to turn the foul cup of the Whore of Babylon into a Holy Grail.”¹⁸⁷ This ambition, of course, is not viable to realise. Hence are the undissolvable frustration and dissatisfaction in the romance.

Since *The Faerie Queene* was written from a male point of view the sources of this frustration are all women. It is their bodies, their behaviour, their actions which create tension. Thus sometimes they are glorified, sometimes demonised – but judgement is rarely spared. In Miller’s interpretation this means that “Spenser may well approach the ethical concerns of feminism as nearly as is possible for a male writer in a nondemocratic, patriarchal tradition and social order.”¹⁸⁸ I agree in that female moral problems are discussed in the romance, however, these issues are raised by men, thus they are mainly ethical problems of men concerning females, and not so much the concerns of females regarding their own identity, limits and potential. It would seem as if Spenser always attempted to gain control over his women: although he places them into morally compromising situations, he is always very careful to make them respond correctly to these. This –with a few exceptions – he manages to accomplish. Intrigued by this suspicion about his lenience, in this chapter of my study, I am going to examine how women relate to sexuality, and what kind of responses are triggered by their acceptance or rejection of

¹⁸⁶ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 638.

¹⁸⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 176.

¹⁸⁸ Miller, *Two Bodies*, 217.

sexuality, and analyse the roots of female sexual ambivalence, and their manifestation as certain behavioural patterns.

Females in *The Faerie Queene* seem to constitute three distinct groups: the chaste ones, the evil temptresses, and the middle women, who are halfway between the two moral extremes.

i. Chaste Women

Spenser's most emphatic and memorable female figures are those chaste women who either appear honourable in their own right, as a royalty, or those who are worthy loved-ones of one of the central knights. Even this definition shows that for Spenser, chastity is not a homogenous notion. Although in some cases it equals celibacy, this reading of the word is not exclusive: in another, Protestant interpretation it involves entering a virtuous companionship, a blessed wedding.

Celibate chastity

There are only a few women who are deemed as honourable, yet allowed to stand independently, and do not require a man to complete their lives. This privileged state is only provided for a few chosen women with exceptional power. Even in this illustrious company, Gloriana is the most unique and outstanding. Despite her shocking absence from the romance, – following the tradition – in this study she is enlisted her among major heroines. She is the titular heroine, the “Faerie Queene,” and thus her figure provides coherence to the work. In his Letter to Raleigh, Spenser informs us that the – planned –

twelve books are structured according to the queen's twelve-day annual fest, where they are supposed to be presented as masques for the ruler. As Frye also highlighted, her existence is vital. He points out that every romance presents an "old wise man," and "[h]e has a feminine counterpart in the sibylline wise mother-figure. (...) This latter figure is often the lady for whose sake or at whose bidding the quest is performed: she is represented by the Faerie Queene in Spenser."¹⁸⁹

Although only six books were completed, the designed structure still prevails, and we definitely feel Gloriana's strong, unifying presence. However, - and her uniqueness is captured here – she never appears on the scene. She is talked about, she is addressed (in proems), but she is never seen in her physical actuality. The closest we get to glimpsing her is through Arthur's dream-vision (I.ix. 13-5), in which the knight reckons to feel Gloriana's substantive presence ("by my side a royall Mayd / Her dainite limbes full softly down did lay"), and amorous embraces ("For dearely sure her loue was to me bent"). Being introduced to a virtually transcendental ruler in such an exposed, emotional state seems almost sacrilegious, but at least inappropriate. Thus the situation's edge is softened by reminding us that the incident was a mere illusion. But in this scene of Gloriana's semi-appearance Spenser is unable to constrain the dream within its own realm, hence it leaks into the actual world of *The Faerie Queene*: as Arthur wakes up he sees the "pressed gras, where she had lyen." (I.ix.15) This minute twist galvanises the episode with mystery and perplexity. Although it leaves Gloriana's noble figure unattained, the riddle is raised as to who lay by Arthur's side that night. Mary Ellen Lamb's reading of the romance endows Gloriana with the feminine skill of deliberate allure. "Spenser's *Faerie Queene* plays with and against the attribution of destructive sexuality to fairy queens. The overarching narrative of Arthur's unsatisfied desires for his fairy queen bears a striking parallel to

¹⁸⁹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 195.

ballads of fairy queens.”¹⁹⁰

The conundrum, indeed, is never solved in the romance, but probably its task is not to give answers, much rather to evoke questions, and, hence maintain interest. Through this beautifully subtle erotic reference, Spenser manages to endow Gloriana with that curious mystery which her persona definitely needs to keep readers intrigued through the course of the romance. Gloriana’s sphinx-like, unfathomable presence, and the inexplicable and inscrutable nature of her relationship with Arthur give her enough narrative strength to hold – or at least attempt to hold – the romance together. Gloriana’s scant, but well-placed emphatic and enigmatic references interweave the work’s texture (for instance Guyon’s shield), and despite her absence, make her a memorable figure. Through her negative presence she is so involved in the romance that in our minds she even becomes manifest: it is so easy to imagine her. With her emblematic feminine authority, without unnecessary words, and actions tainting her figure, she manages to remain the most noble, perfect, goddess-like woman of the fairy world.

According to W.H. Herendeen,¹⁹¹ Gloriana’s presence in the romance is deleted because her persona was split into two, and then appears through the characters of Belphebe (as the queen’s public self) and Amoret (her private self). Although this theory seems apt, especially, because it is underpinned by Spenser’s often-quoted letter to Raleigh, it still requires some reconsideration, and some amendment. The assumption is that Gloriana, as the ideal woman’s manifestation, appears in all Spenserian (positive) heroines to some degree. Examining these heroines reveals that all of them are bestowed with traits which an ideal queen shall possess.

Mercilla is – no doubt – one of these idealised figures. She embodies the ideal

¹⁹⁰ Lamb, *Popular Culture*, 174.

¹⁹¹ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 334.

ruler facet of Gloriana's character. With her just, but merciful verdicts she proves to be the ideal conglomerate of sense and heart needed for governing. However, when she has to convict Duessa, her negative counterpart, her assertiveness falters. Although Mercilla is aware of Duessa's malpractices, she is hesitant to sentence her to death: "But she, whose Princely breast was touched nere / With piteous ruth of her so wretched plight, / Thought plaine she saw by all, that she did heare, / That she of death was guiltie found" (V.ix.50). The reason for Mercilla's delay is probably because Duessa appears in court in an aristocratic hue, with "rare beautie in her face" (V.ix.38) as the queen of the underworld, and is correspondingly dignified as "[a] Ladie of great countenance and place" (V.ix.38). Mercilla struggles to annihilate a female ruler, perhaps on account of their similarity. Subconsciously the message is there: if Duessa, whose power seemed infinite and transcendental (though devilish) can be overthrown, then Mercilla's incessant power might be more insecure than envisaged. The mere fact that Mercilla's transcendentalism derives from heaven does not seem a satisfying warrant. Duessa's force came from the other end of the moral spectrum, and it was not sufficient. As Andrew Hadfield noted "the queen needs to distinguish between true and false passion in order to govern successfully,"¹⁹² and indeed, Mercilla's grandiosity is proved by her ability to overcome her own insecurity and act righteously. Duessa has to die (V.x.4).

Mercilla's character impeccably embodies a queen's public self, but no space is given to her private, feminine self. She foreshadows Gloriana as a just queen, but she is non-corporeal, icon-like and abstract, thus unable to be feminine and attractive.

While Gloriana and Mercilla represent aristocratic chastity, Medina displays ordinary purity. As if she had been created from conduct books, everything about her is neat and impeccable: on the basis of her characterisation, Spenser puts down his definition

¹⁹² Andrew Hadfield, *Spenser and the Death of the Queen*, 38.

of the conventional ideal woman. Here no suppressed emotions or lustful thoughts emerge, there is only one point when the mask of Medina's properness seems to crack- when with bare chest she rushes out of her chamber to prevent the knights' fight - but eventually, the façade remains intact. Her passionate flare-up does not demolish the well-mannered demeanour, rather enriches it, and contributes to her appreciation.

Medina's marital status is not clearly stated, most likely she is not married - but she definitely has the masculine liberty of living alone and looking after herself, which lifestyle is normally guaranteed for women of nun-like abstinence. However, Medina has a courtlier ambience with evocable sexuality. For instance, when Guyon arrives tired and exhausted she gently "led him vp into a goodly bowre, / And comely courted with meet modestie." (II.ii.15) In this book bowers have special significance: since in the first canto Amavia mentioned Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, its references keep re-emerging - usually with sexual connotations. Hence Guyon being guided to a bower by Medina, evokes the other more dangerous bower's atmosphere in connection with Medina, who thus gains erotic traits, which instead of refuting her perfection, rather contribute to Spenser's view of her as the ideal woman of the book.

In opposition to Medina, Belphebe, the main heroine of Book II offers multiple aspects of respectable female behaviour, other than abstinent celibacy. Although in comparison to Mercilla and Medina she is one step closer to femininity, she is still unable to fully commit herself to it. Hence in her episode, we witness an excruciating clash between celibate chastity and chaste love.

When we first get a glimpse of her, Belphebe appears as a Diana-like powerful, Amazonian, unattainable woman. With Paglia's words "[a] woman of 'Heroick minde,' she intimidates by her monomania, evasion of physical contact, and want of ordinary homely emotion. (...) She is impenetrable, like the frosty, unknowable Garbo, in whom Roland

Barthes sees an archetypal impersonality.”¹⁹³ By birth she is partly human, partly a deity, and as we can see from Paglia’s remark, initially her transcendental side is dominant. She can even pass through a farce untainted. In this scene with Trompart and Braggadocchio, the comic effect derives from their misunderstanding of her nature and intentions: they only notice the surface, her attractive body, and fail to see her true essence. She can afford to participate in such an incident with her reputation being unharmed, because of her indubitable moral superiority.

Belphoebe seems to belong to the strata of gods, rather than earthly inhabitants. Consequently, when in Book III the readers learn about Timias's affections towards her, his emotional needs are expected to remain unfulfilled. We also expect to hear a Petrarchan tone emerge, since a refined passionate male lover and an unattainable woman usually create the typical situation of the courtly-Petrarchan game of desire and rejection. However, in this instance something different happens as Timias takes his emotions too seriously, whereas Belphoebe ignores them entirely. Because of this strong discrepancy of feelings a conventional Petrarchan relation cannot evolve. Timias not only gets discouraged by his unrequited love, but he gets debilitated and confused. He desperately plunges into the woods and transforms into a savage man. Meanwhile Belphoebe stands baffled. She does not understand love, or the depth of it. She is mounted above the level of bodily passions, she stands there beautiful, glittering but hard and cold. This aloofness frustrates Timias to extremes.

The only emotion which gets close to Belphoebe’s heart in connection to Timias is excruciating pity. When she glimpses him wounded “Full of soft passion and vnwonted smart: / The point of pittie perced through her tender heart.” (III.v.30) As Miller noted “[t]he image of piercing Belphoebe’s heart suggests that this emotion is a substitute for

¹⁹³ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 179.

erotic attachment, and may qualify our sense of her divine self-sufficiency.”¹⁹⁴

After having met Timias in Book III Belphoebe comes across as less allegorical, less transcendental. Her character does not seem immaculate and righteous anymore. She is responsible for not being able to cure the injured Timias, and even worsening his – symbolic – wound. Here contradictory expectations are raised for Belphoebe: she is required to be an eternal, chaste goddess, and also an emotional, compassionate woman. Hence, she cannot leave this situation triumphantly. In the romance she chooses to preserve her chastity, and to reject the potential for a relationship based on love, - and she is not rewarded for this by any means. We can toy with the hypothetical situation, that had she yielded to Timias, would she have met favourable judgement. The romance suggests a positive answer. It is true that we have witnessed grandiose respected female figures who remained chaste, stayed abstinent from men (Medina and Mercilla), but in the Spenserian world there are also women who descend from the elevated heights of unattainability, and devote their lives to marriage with a worthy man. Implicitly and subtly this latter group, who fulfil their roles as wives and mothers, thus accomplish their feminine roles, seem to be handled and talked about with more veneration than the former. On this account, Belphoebe’s unfavourable judgement can be interpreted as an advice for sixteenth century women to accept and recognise values of marital life.

The only moment when Belphoebe betrays some of her affection to Timias is at the end of IV.vii. Amoret fleeing from a savage man chances upon the hunting Belphoebe and Timias, who rescue her. While Belphoebe pursues the man, Timias stays behind with Amoret. As Belphoebe returns “she him found by that new louely mate, / (...) / From her faire eyes wiping the deawy wet, / Which softly stild, and kissing them atweene, / And handling soft the hurts, which she did get.” (IV.vii.35) Belphoebe seeing Timias and

¹⁹⁴ Miller, *Two Bodies*, 233.

Amoret in such an intimate embrace is infuriated. This extreme overflow of emotions is incongruous to her so far calm and serene character.

Her noble heart with sight thereof was fild
With deepe disdain, and great indignity,
That in her wrath she thought them both haue kild:
Yet held her wrathfull hand from vengeance sore,
But drawing nigh, ere her well beheld.” (IV.vii.36)

Being on the verge of murder definitely betrays her frantic state of mind and the depths of her emotions. With Belpheobe’s story Spenser “represents the continual effort that for Spenser is required to live a temperate life.”¹⁹⁵

Continent chastity

Belpheobe’s hesitant abstinence guides us in the direction of another certain, specific and definable group of females: chaste women, in whose case chastity does not equal celibacy, but consummated, married love. Florimell is one of them, however, her character is not free from controversial traits. She is endowed with alluring beauty, but she lacks the other great heroines’ strength and self-confidence. Interestingly, while this dichotomy is obvious for us, characters of the romance's world react to her more positively. Apparently, there is a rather wide gap between how we and her fictional companions perceive her. In the romance she tempts and maddens, but for us, readers, she comes across as naive and stolid. For us she is not only feeble, but feeble-minded. Nevertheless, in the romance she charms all men regardless of social status, intentions, age or intelligence: princes, knights, base men, old scoundrels. Even Arthur, the epitome of

¹⁹⁵ Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England, Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 46.

wise knighthood feels respectable admiration towards her. For this, partly her excessive softness is responsible. Her feminine weakness triggers two kinds of responses in the romance world: the virtuous want to protect her, the wicked want to take advantage of her. Meanwhile we are confronted with and shown the diverse impacts this indulgent kind of femininity has on men. They fail to see the real person, because they either concentrate on her humbleness and helplessness, or they are merely ignited by the possibility of easy pleasures. However, we have to remember, that these critical words do not mean that Florimell is a negligible character; despite her potential for being fallible she is definitely one of Spenser's grand female heroines. She is a significant and rather didactic example for women about behaviour to follow and to avoid.

The extent to which Florimell tempts men results in a sequence of pursuits which is on the borders on comedy. Her first appearance on the scene in Book III is emblematic: she is being chased by a “griesly Forester” (III.i.17), then by an “accursed Hag,” her “wicked son” and their Hyena “that feeds on womens flesh” (III.vii.22), by a filthy old fisherman (III.viii.20-9) and finally captured by Proteus (III.viii.30). Although the story of Florimell expands lengthily in the romance (III.i - IV.xii) the majority of the pursuits closely follow each other. Except for her introductory flight (in III.i.) all take place in III. vii-viii in close proximity to each other. From this sequence Florimell comes across as helpless and naive. She lacks the ability to judge characters and situations correctly. She is on the verge of being rescued more times, but due to her erroneous decision she falls back into anguish: when Arthur approaches to rescue her, she gets dismayed by his “vncouth shield and straunge armes” (III.iv.51), and rather asks refuge at the hag’s house; and while Satyrane slays the threatening Hyena, she obliviously jumps into the arms of a lecherous fisherman, whom she addresses as “father.” (III.viii.23) Based on these traits Paglia blames Florimell for her own miseries. She believes that Florimell’s “[v]ulnerability

generates its own entrapments, creating a maelstrom of voracity around itself,¹⁹⁶ and she even goes as far as stating that "[n]aivet  evokes its own destruction."¹⁹⁷

And indeed, although other heroines encounter similarly lecherous characters (Una with Archimago or Amoret with the savage man) they manage to recognise them, and protect themselves. Hence their pursuers do not have the chance to get as physically close as they do with Florimell. Other heroines also trigger physical attraction in men, but it is always mixed with admiration and reverence (Una and the satyrs, Belphoebe and Timias). In Florimell's case the temptation is mostly carnal, without Platonic overtones. Upon seeing her, the Hag's wicked son "cast to loue her in his brutish mind; / No loue, but brutish lust, that was so beastly tind. // Closely the wicked flame his-bowels brent, / And shortly grew into outrageous fire" (III.vii.15-16). She barely escapes the fisherman's rape:

The inward smoke, that did before but steeme,
Broke into open fire and rage extreme,
And now he strength gan adde vnto his will,
Forcing to doe, that did him fowle misseeme:
Beastly he threw her downe, ne car'd to spill
Her garments gay with scales of fish, that all did fill." (III.viii.26)

Being rescued by Proteus – instead of bringing relief – causes even more dismay: "Her vp betwixt his rugged hands he reard, / And with his frore lips full softly kist, / Whiles the cold ysickles from his rough beard, / Dropped adowne vpon her yuorie brest." (III. viii.35) This is the last phase of her pursuit, however, her plot is not abandoned until IV.xii when she is reunited with Marinell. It is up to the readers' imagination what happened to Florimell in Proteus's "bowre." But no doubt, Florimell changes in Proteus's dungeon: she becomes more mature, and finally becomes able to attract and keep Marinell's attention and love.

¹⁹⁶ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 186.

¹⁹⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 36.

Florimell's pulchritude even impresses the most noble and respectable knight, Arthur. Unlike Guyon and Timias, who renounce her search, he persistently follows her. This enterprise could suggest that Arthur became unfaithful to Gloriana, but as Gordon Teskey notes, in this instance "his tendency to admire ladies other than the one he is seeking (...) is intended not to suggest waywardness but a nobility of character,"¹⁹⁸ and his noble love ("goodly fire" III.v.i.) towards Florimell "to his first poursuit him forward still doth call." (III.v.2.) Hence, instead of being a digression, the attempt to rescue Florimell becomes an integral part of Arthur's grandiose quest for Gloriana. Although he is unsuccessful in his venture, the fact that Arthur deems Florimell respectable and admirable adds flavour and curiosity to her persona, and elevates her onto the level of the primary heroines. This excessive effort and interest of Arthur radiates to Florimell's character. She is intriguing not so much of her own accord, but of the context and connotations.

Another facet which colours her persona to a great extent is her artificial alter ego, the false Florimell. She is created in III.viii.6. by the hag to console her son for losing the real Florimell. Soon this creature ceases to be a mere toy: since her beauty is identical to her model's, she attracts as much attention, and provokes as much lust and turmoil as her model did. (Braggadochio, Paridell, Ferraugh, Blandamour, The Squire of Dames, Satyrane and Artegall are attracted to her.)

The interchangeability of the real and the false Florimell indicates that they are viewed superficially by the romance's male characters, and that for these figures who interact with the real and the false Florimell inner qualities are inferior to appearance. It suggests that a person is defined by how she is perceived by others. The individual as such is superfluous, she can be substituted by a "massie mould" of snow, animated by a "Spright," who is not only wicked, but masculine: during the creation of the incarnate

¹⁹⁸ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 70.

persona, the spirit is described as “Him needed not instruct, which way were best / Himselfe to fashion likest *Florimell*.” (III.viii.8) But this is not noticed, the false Florimell is deemed as noble and important, thus she is handled that way. She manages to be the key figure in IV.ii, at Satyrane’s tournament. In this episode, she achieves a degree of independence and initiative, which her model persona never managed to. Interestingly here her negative, manipulative features are portrayed with a slight tone of appreciation instead of total condemnation: “So great a mistresse of her art she was, / And perfectly practiz’d in womans craft.” (IV.ii.10) She is the epicentre of this episode, all actions revolve around her, she takes the reigns managing to deceive and ridicule most male characters.

The climax of her trifles takes place when despite her inability to wear the girdle of chastity (“For euer as they fastned it, it loos’d / And fell away, as feeling secret blame.” IV.v.16) the knights of Maidenhead unanimously proclaim her as the most beautiful thus award her the girdle: “They all agreed, and then that snowy Mayd / Was in the middlest plast among them all; (...) And to the Queene of beautie close did call.” (IV.v.26) With the girdle she is provided with an award, which is denied to most of the romance’s ladies: she has the right of choosing a partner from the adoring many: “Then when she long had lookt vpon each one, / As though she wished to haue pleasd them all, / At last to Braggadochio selfe alone / She came of her accord.” (IV.v.26) Although the primary females of the romance are not forced into relationships, they are neither given such liberty to opt for a lover. In their cases it was faith or divine predestination which ordained them together, and we have never witnessed their free will in action in this regard, yet, the choices exclusively prove to be fitting. Through this disgraceful alter ego of a positive character women are shown the dangers of relying on lust and attraction (“she wished to haue pleasd them all”) instead of higher powers: from the many courting men the false Florimell chooses Braggadochio, the most condemnable one. Although is it not stated whether this choice

was based on her preference of scoundrels to virtuous men or misjudgement. With this conclusion, the false Florimell exhausts her role in the romance, she disappears with her knight, giving back the scene to her “real” equivalent.

From Spenser’s description Florimell comes across as rather unfavourable. However, if we observe the Florimell-episode from another point of view, that of the men, we can see that an opposing interpretation is also possible. In fact, all of these masculine knights, the epitome of courtly fashion, raft with testosterone and competitiveness, woo and adore a male spirit covered by snow and wax. In my reading, these knights are more ridiculous than Florimell, whose fault is merely being naive. These men fail to recognise real values, their sensibility is conquered by lust. The only knight in the tournament who is not deceived by the false Florimell is Britomart, who at this point, is considered to be male. When the undignified argument begins, she discretely leaves with her lady, Amoret. Thus, if we view the larger picture, the Florimell-false Florimell episode not only highlights the weak vulnerability of women, but also the fallibility and meaningless aggression of men. With Britomart’s distinguished behaviour, the final joust is awarded to women.

The way Florimell presents herself indicates that she is aware of the advantages of being innocent and inane. When she recognises the Hag’s ill will she tries to calm down the witch with making herself seem helpless and thus pitied: “Beldame be not wroth / With silly Virgin by adventure brought / Vnto your dwelling, ignorant and loth, / That craue rowme to rest, while tempest ouerblo’th.” (III.vii.8) As a matter of course we could assume that these words are uttered by her as the humble sentences of deception of a shrewd character who knows how to evoke sympathy, but Florimell’s consequent behaviour suggests otherwise. It is revealed that she intrinsically lacks self-esteem, she naturally perceives herself as a “silly virgin,” who is not worthy of anything else, but compassion. Taking the plot into consideration, this is not startling: she was ignored and rejected by her

admired Marinell, and later, during her fleeing she only encounters men who either help her out of pity or try to seduce her.

Through all her adventures, Florimell's primary motivating force is to find Marinell. As very often with Spenser the past of this major character is also revealed analytically. However, in Florimell's case, the information is slightly restricted: we cannot fathom her personal background, she does not have parents, a country or a secluded castle where she belongs to. From the dwarf's report to Arthur, we only get to know that she initially fled from Marinell's court. No words are mentioned about her position there, but from implications it can be deduced that she is also of high rank, for instance, no objections have ever been made - even by Cymoent - regarding her birth, and also all the errant knights, including Arthur, treat her with reverence. Upon hearing the news about her loved-one's assumed death, she suddenly leaves the court, swearing not to return until she finds Marinell dead or alive. Thus she embarks on her epic journey. We have already seen her miseries and mishaps, and how inappropriately she reacts to these, however, the fact that despite her inabilities she sets off into unknown lands deserves some appreciation. Especially considering the respectable quests of Arthur, Redcrosse or Guyon, who are also not exempt from misjudgement and digression. There is no doubt that Florimell is more defective than the mentioned knights, but her perseverance equals theirs, moreover even surpasses theirs, since her digressions are involuntary, whereas the knights can temporarily be charmed by other attractive females.

As enthusiastic Florimell is about Marinell, so indifferent the knight is towards her advances: "All her delight is set on *Marinell*/ But he sets nought at all by *Florimell*." (III.v.9) Marinell's unrequited love stems in the prediction which was given by Proteus to Marinell's mother: "...from womankind to keepe him well: / For of a woman he should haue much ill, / A virgin strange and stout him should dismay, or kill." (III.iv.25) Cymoent

(Marinell's mother, a nymph) interprets the prediction as her son is threatened by a devastating love, a *femme fatale*. Because of these words she protects him from all female advances. Reading the prediction this way can not only reveal the nymph's aversion to love, but also the universal fear of mothers over losing their sons. She sees Proteus's words as the materialisation of her worries, as in a general case of fortune telling, she reads her personal fears into the dubious words. So she chooses not to let Marinell woo anyone. However, her precaution proves to be misjudged: it was not Marinell's heart which was in danger, but his actual body and her power. He, being the ruler of the "Rich Strond" is overthrown by Britomart, the virgin knight. Thus the prediction comes true. The disaster has happened. As tragic it is, there is also relief in it: there is no need anymore to fear the unknown. The obstacle is averted, and Marinell can open himself to romantic feelings. Paradoxically, losing the joust against Britomart, - which is his first defeat ever - turns him into a man. He gets over his childish competitiveness, and starts thinking. Cymoent's control over him ceases. He is ready for another woman.

Seemingly Cymoent's anxious restriction was unnecessary: she protected Marinell from something she did not need to, whereas she could not defend him from real dangers. But the futility in terms of actions does not equal narrative superfluity: overcoming these hardships served as an initiation to adulthood for both Marinell and Florimell, due to them they became able to finally notice each other, and find a satisfying completion in marriage. In Northrop Frye's reading, the fluctuation of this relationship "keeps the cycle of nature turning."¹⁹⁹

The alteration in Florimell's character can be captured in her lengthy lament (IV. xii. 6-11) in Proteus's prison. Here, the so far mute or staggering Florimell comes forward with an eloquent monologue. Not only has her style changed, but also the content of this

¹⁹⁹ Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 83.

speech, indicating her maturity. "Though vaine I see my sorrowes to vnfold, / And count my cares, when none is nigh to heare, / Yet hoping griefe may lessen being told, / I will them tell though vnto no man neare." (IV. xii. 6)

We also understand that her affection towards Marinell is not a juvenile obsession but deep love. Her emotions are rhapsodic, ranging from total desperation of the belief that her love cannot be fulfilled in this world, through taking self-torturing pleasure in blaming and punishing Marinell with her desired death (IV.xii.9), and finally wishing to be imprisoned in her narrow cell with Marinell (IV.xii.10). Despite the scattered thoughts, the tone of the elegy is even: the flow of the words is driven by deep sadness, self-sacrifice and unselfish love.

With her faults and virtues, Florimell is an example for females concerning what kind of behaviour to follow and what to avoid. Generally speaking, Florimell meets the requirements of sixteenth century women. She is ordinary, because she is not entitled to violate any of the prescribed rules: she is punished for being attractive, and for triggering men's lust, for not being militantly virtuous, and her only way of finding security in life is marriage.

Una, the central heroine of Book I is endowed with a stronger, more confident persona than Florimell, nevertheless, her individuality is somewhat restricted. At first sight, in relation to the Redcrosse knight, who guards her, she appears as flat and listless. She is mute and passive. She is even restricted in her movements: she limply and obediently sits on a donkey which is led by the knight. This way she is led astray, into the evil magician, Archimago's house. Curiously at this location, where the seeming harmony between the princess and the knight cracks and shatters, Una gains the charisma and vigour to act. The opposite happens to Redcrosse. He gets confused and embarrassed. Amidst actions where his combatant skills are not needed, but instead, humane and manly

communication, his courage vanishes, and so does he. Without any explanation to Una, whom he is supposed to guard and defend, he flees the scene. Here he seems to possess merely primitive skills: the ability to fight, to solve hardships with physical manly force, however, the feminine skills of empathy and communication escape him. Una is the opposite: she cannot rebel against customary masculine rule, but when she is alone in the fairy world of magic and intrigue, amidst all the hardships she gradually finds herself. But first she has to fall into deep despair, she has to lose herself entirely to be able to build up her identity.

During the initial part of her lonely wanders Una's lament reaches its negative climax, she even gets to the verge of self-disruptiveness: "She did pray, / That plagues, and mischiefs, and long misery / Might fall on her, and follow all the way, / And that in endlesse error she might euer stray" (I.iii.23). Most analyses regarding this topic highlight a later episode, when Redcrosse falls prey to agony at Errour's Den and Una rescues him. However, Una's lament, an example of female desperation, fails to catch attention. Here Una is forlorn and the sight of Redcrosse enlivens her. It is also worth noticing that while the knight is condemned on account of his desperation, the narrator does not express similar opinion on Una's state. Is it positive or negative? Can women do things that men cannot? Paul Suttie in his *Self-Interpretation in The Faerie Queene* also mentions the arbitrary narrator, but in his interpretation the emphasis is rather placed on its reason: "the much-noted unreliability of the narrator proves to be a secondary phenomenon, an extension of the story's own dubious self-interpretive regime rather than a (...) misinterpretation on the story's action."²⁰⁰

Interestingly, after the neglected scene of Una's desperation, she receives – purely on her account – more attention than she had ever before. She gains the strength to act. She

²⁰⁰ Paul Suttie, *Self-Interpretation in The Faerie Queene* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 61.

becomes animated, and begins to act and move around the fairy world, where she is allowed to make – both good and bad – decisions. She has odd and strange encounters with a wide range of different characters, who gradually improve her. She eventually learns how to react to obstacles, and that her reactions do matter: she can change others' intentions, thus, she can alter her own fate. The peak of this learning process is when, captured by the lustful satyrs, she takes the initiative and starts educating and teaching them how to read. Although in this case nature proves to be stronger than nurture, she does not manage to fulfil her undertaking, she emerges as a significantly stronger, more sanguine persona than previously. As Richard Chamberlain has shown, here in the satyr-episode Una has very clear ideas in terms of what to achieve: she was “only interested in changing them so that they become more like herself.”²⁰¹

However, her character does not manage to maintain this level of individuality: upon meeting the Redcrosse she willingly surrenders to him, and falls flat. There have been sign of this submission earlier in the plot: when Una catches sight of Archimago disguised as Redcrosse, she does not question the reason of her abandonment in the past, instead she greets him with overflowing joy: “she speaks no more / Of past.” (I.iii.30) Suttie well points out Una's submissive self: “when Archimago disguised as Redcross offers, as excuse for having abandoned her in a dangerous wilderness, his having gone off to undertake that same ‘adventure in a strange place’ (...) she again accepts that adventure as a legitimate diversion from his quest on her behalf.”²⁰² (I.iii.29-32)

When the real knight comes upon Una, we witness a situation similar to the previous one: Redcrosse takes Una for granted, only he is allowed to have reservations. Only after he ensures himself of her chastity, is he finally willing to marry her. She does

²⁰¹ Richard Chamberlain, *Radical Spenser - Pastoral, Politics and the New Aestheticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 64.

²⁰² Suttie, *Self Interpretation*, 69.

not raise any questions. Nevertheless, the blissful nuptials are thwarted by Duessa. Una has to bear the humiliating scene of reading Duessa's letter aloud about her knight being unfaithful. But at this point Una has fallen back into her submissive self, and passively accepts her predestined role, and lethargically lets the knight engage her, then leave her, and embark on another interminable quest.

A trait which links Una with Florimell is her false alter ego. They serve similar purposes: to tempt virtuous men into sin. The false Una is forged by Archimago to lure Redcrosse. The description of how she is made enforces our previous image of the Lady: the fake and the genuine ladies' similarity is perfect.

It is interesting to notice that we are unaware of how the knight perceives Una. He never talks about his lady, and we never get an account of his thoughts. Only once are we provided with a glimpse into his mind: during his dream in Archimago's house. The knight has a lustful fantasy about Una: the woman appears in his bedchamber, caresses him, lies next to him. "Redcrosse consequently dreams of romance topoi: 'bowres, and beds, and Ladies deare delight,' an image that looks forward to the dalliance that takes place at the Castle Joyous"²⁰³ as McManus highlighted. Although, it is emphasised that this vision was evoked by Archimago, it cannot be discarded on this ground, it is still an erotic intermezzo narrated in great detail.

Just after the dream, the false Una visits Redcrosse, and with lustful words and kisses attempts to tempt him. Redcrosse becomes outraged, his first thought is to kill the woman, whom he finally just chases away. The same intense anger can be detected later as Sir Guyon destroys the Bower of Blisse. It is also essential to notice how female charm makes cold, calm men angry. A dichotomy grasps our attention at this point: as soon as Redcrosse's dream comes true, he rejects it, as soon as the fantasy becomes reality it

²⁰³ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 69.

ceases to be exciting, when Una becomes available, she ceases to be the object of desire.

Consequently, Redcrosse's and the narrator's behaviour are highly resembling: both create lustful visions about an unattainable woman, but when she ceases to be chase – that is behaving according to their fantasies – they lose interest in her. The identical nature of the two male voices suggests that their similarity is not a coincidence, and the narrator's remark on Una is simply a projection of that of Redcrosse. Except for the clearly marked dialogues the boundary between the main characters and the narrator is blurred, one is the projection of the other, and vice versa.

Although Redcrosse rejected the advances of the (false) Una, when he witnesses the luscious scene of Una “In wanton lust and lewd embracement” (I.ii.5.5) “he burnt with gealous fire” (I.ii.5.6.). This scene shows a strong resemblance to the principle of the Petrarchan paradox: the (male) lover insatiably longs for a pure and chaste lady. However, if she yielded to him, he would cease to admire her, since the foundation of his admiration, the untainted pureness of the lady would not exist any longer. The episode of Redcrosse, Una and the false Una captures and harnesses this theory: we were provided with a glimpse into Redcrosse's soul, and saw his yearning for Una, and now we witnessed the other premise of the syllogism, the yielding of the lady, and the consequences it triggered in the knight, the strong and firm rejection.

The creation of the false Una by Spenser proves to be a well operated twist: thus a lustful fantasy can be satisfied without consequences. We shall keep in mind that Una is the representation of an idealised female ruler, whom it would be inappropriate to have a salacious fantasy about. However, if the erotic dream happens to a creation possessing merely a sublime air body, there is no ground for offence.

On the non-fictional level of the plot Una remains chaste and uncorrupted. Her being deserted by the Redcrosse knight is an opportunity to demonstrate her independence

from her male guard, her courage, her ability to make decisions, to carry on alone. These characteristics are also enforced by the actions of an evil character, the sorcerer Archimago. He is one of the vilest figures of the romance, and also one of those few, who appears persistently in more than one canto. The second canto of the first book lets us know that “her [=Una] he [=Archimago] hated as the hissing snake, / And in her many troubles did most pleasure take.” (I.ii.9.) Traditionally, if we encounter a noble couple such as a knight and lady, the enemy’s target is the former, the latter evokes anger hostility merely on the account that she is the partner of the knight, never because of her own personality. It would be as if her personality were merged with that of the knight, and thus she were not “worthy” of contempt. The episode under scrutiny demonstrates a different pattern: here the object of Archimago’s hostility is Una, not her knight. Apparently the roles are reversed: Redcrosse has become a victim only owing to the circumstance that he was guarding the lady. The power and strength of the evil character is not a negligible argument either. Archimago’s qualities imply his enemy’s prominence as well. One has to be worthy of his foe. And Una definitely is, she is a larger than life, noble figure. The narrator keeps reminding us of Una’s prominent background. She is indomitable, she can cope with hardships, she faces the challenges set to her by being alone. “She of nought affrayd, / Through woods and wastnesse wide him [=Redcrosse] daily sought.” (I.iii.3.) In addition to her gentle blood (I.iii.2), her personal merits are not negligible.

Nevertheless, Una is not immaculate and not elevated into transcendental heights. Although she is often interpreted (for instance by Frances Yates)²⁰⁴ as one of the embodiments of the Queen, her figure is less pure and unattainable than Mercilla’s or Gloriana’s. The sexual fantasy about Una’s body would be impossible to appear in connection with Gloriana or Mercilla. A similar instance is with Sansloy’s assault: he

²⁰⁴ Yates, “Queen Elizabeth as Astrea,” 27-82.

dragged Una to a forest, where “He snatcht the vele, that hong her face before;/ Then gan her beautie shine, as brightest skye, / And burnt his beastly hart t’efforce her chastitye” and “With greedy force he gan the fort assaile.” (I.vi.4-5) According to Paglia “[i]n *The Faerie Queene*, the ability to fend off rape is a prerequisite of the ideal female psyche.”²⁰⁵ This has implications about Una: if it were not for the satyrs, after seeing Sansloy’s unrestrainable desires, her chastity is likely to have been tainted.

Thinking along Paglia’s statement, Una’s completeness is questioned. She is incapable of fighting off those who threaten to intrude her private sphere, without relying on heavenly intervention. “Vulnerability generates its own entrapments, creating a maelstrom of voracity around itself.”²⁰⁶ Paglia defines Florimell as “a professional victim”²⁰⁷, on account of her series of unfortunate abuses. However, - especially in canto vi – Una’s fate is fairly alike: from Sansloy she rushes into the embarrassing worship of the unrefined, bodily satyrs, and even when escaping from there she cannot outmanoeuvre Archimago. At the end of her book the final completion is denied to her, also implying that she is not ready yet to fulfil her role as a wife. Her character is an attempt to present a young girl maturing into a woman. She meets the requirements of the conduct book, but she is not powerful enough to transgress its boundaries and emerge as a full, autonomous woman. She is a lively figure with childlike charm. Her character lacks resourcefulness, independence and depth.

At this point the question naturally arises that despite her weaknesses how can we give account of her name, Una, the One, representing the one and only truth of reformed religion.²⁰⁸ Suttie delineated an intriguing, but acceptable explanation.

²⁰⁵ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 186.

²⁰⁶ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 186.

²⁰⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 186.

²⁰⁸ Yates, “Queen Elizabeth as Astrea,” 68.

[T]o look in Una for what we might call the 'simple truth' about Redcross turns out, despite her association with those words, to be curiously inappropriate; for stating the plain truth about him is not even ideally Una's role. Rather her function, as it emerges in practice, would be better described as one of always being *true* to her knight."²⁰⁹

This rather unique interpretation of Una corresponds with, and thus fits smoothly into the notion of the Spenserian heroines. In this reading Una is not a transcendental figure, rather a woman, who supports the socially accepted convention of adequate female behaviour. All her valuable traits are essential to prove that she is worthy of a noble husband, and to be able to demonstrate the luxury of abandoning her potential of admirable actions in order to be a good wife. To sum her up with one statement, Una enforces the prescribed rules of conduct books, during her lonely wanderings she could be on the verge of violating them, but her exemplary manners prevent her from any misdemeanour.

While Florimel and Una only strived for fulfilment in marriage, the story of Amoret, the next chaste Spenserian heroine, beautifully displays the transgression between the two kinds of chastity: celibacy and venerable marriage. Her plot is presented analytically in the romance. Sporadically, in distant cantos we come upon newer and newer information regarding her past, thus we are constantly made to reconsider Amoret's character and revise our opinion about her. This faceted narration keeps our attention aroused, and even makes us biased towards Amoret. Although we have noticed some improvement in Florimell's and Una's persona, but because of the linear narration, it has not caught such strong attention. Amoret's tale is not in need of any manipulation or enhancing technique. Even if her narrative had unfolded conventionally, it could have sustained the readers' interest, however, with its mosaic-like structure it becomes one of the most complex, exciting and thought-provoking female stories in the romance. "[T]here

²⁰⁹ Suttie, *Self-Interpretation*, 110.

are fleeting suggestions (...) that Amoret might be a central character: for as the subject of a rescue by Arthur in canto eight, and a presence in the allegorical set-piece of canto ten, she possesses a certain attenuated fashion a couple of credentials that earlier books taught us to expect of a hero."²¹⁰ In analysing Amoret it would be best to follow the romance's analeptic structure and ignore chronology.

The first rather subtle remark about her is in III. vi. This canto describes the fruitful Garden of Adonis, "the 'lap' of feminine nature,"²¹¹ where Venus resides, and with Frye "it is nature as nature would be if man could live in his proper human world, the 'antique Golden Age.'"²¹² Amoret's presence is not emphatic yet, her mother, Chrysogone, her sister, Belpheobe and her foster mother Venus over-glow her. If this episode had not had relevance in Amoret's later life, it would have been easily forgotten. But bearing in mind Amoret's consecutive importance, and analysing the environment of her childhood from this aspect, the location itself is supposed to definitely set her off on a certain path, towards femininity and procreation. However, despite her strong, distinct background as she first appears on the scene, she does not possess qualities which she should have been endowed with in the Garden, where "Franckly each paramour his leman knowes, / Each bird his mate" (III.vi.41) and "in themselves eternall moisture they imply" (III.vi.34). This fertile and abundant garden, which uniquely accommodates the entire cycle of life is "a projection of the female anatomy."²¹³ However, despite this concentrated femininity – because of its obvious closeness to and unity with nature – the garden is handled with reverence, instead of reservations which increased fertility often triggers. Rufus Wood's condensed definition of this location highlights the excuse of metaphorical interpretation,

²¹⁰ Paul Suttie, *Self-Interpretation*, 175.

²¹¹ Miller, *Two Bodies*, 231.

²¹² Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 82.

²¹³ Miller, *Two Bodies*, 220.

“the Garden of Adonis offers an environment which constitutes a poetic space rather than a narrative progression.”²¹⁴

The other important facet of Amoret’s youth is revealed to us from Scudamour’s account in IV.x about freeing Amoret from the temple of Venus. From his narration we get an impression of this pagan sanctuary as another concentration of sexuality. Here not only can allegorical representations (like Womanhood, Shamefastness, Cheerfulness, Modestie, Curtesie, Silence and Obedience) for conventional feminine values’ be found, but also more ambiguous and gender-wise less distinct ones, such as Danguer, Love, Hate, Concord, Peace and Friendship, which are united in Venus’s androgynous persona.

Bearing these two locations in mind, which are both “locales [of] female sexuality”²¹⁵ Amoret’s inexperience and ignorance about love and sex is striking. Although she is presented as more skilful and tougher than Florimell, the adventures she goes through are similar to hers. Despite being the foster-daughter of Venus Amoret constantly falls victim to love and sexual abuse. First we see her being held captive and used at Busirane’s castle at a daemonic procession. What really takes place in the Castle remains cryptic, since it is so hidden by the hectic events, the colourful characters and mostly by the potential metaphors. Barbara Baines’s reading of the episode sheds light on Amoret’s calamities. “Occasionally in the major literary works of the period rape is so highly metaphorized, so masked or ‘masqued,’ as to escape the critic’s detection altogether. Such, perhaps, is the story of Amoret in the House of Busirane in the final cantos of Book 3 of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*.”²¹⁶ Camille Paglia with her usual radical interpretation has no doubt about Amoret’s abuse. The events in the castle with all their

²¹⁴ Rufus Wood, *Metaphor and Belief in The Faerie Queene* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 24.

²¹⁵ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 151.

²¹⁶ Barbara J. Baines, *Representing Rape In The English Early Modern Period* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 78.

brutality and torture evoke a strange amalgam of horror and attraction in us. “Spenser, making exquisite aestheticism out of torture and rape, arouses us through the aggressive pagan eye. Amoret’s ‘wide wound’ is her passivity but our probing and delectation.”²¹⁷

The similar sentiments of Amoret's passivity and our amusement emerge when Britomart dressed as male rescues Amoret. She trembles with fear over what this knight would demand in exchange for his services. In this episode the two basic kinds of chastity are contrasted. Britomart manifests a regimented kind of chastity, whereas Amoret the soft, feminine chaste love. Ostensibly, the two women are opposites, but viewing them as a unit reveals their complementary nature, as together they contain the whole essence of femininity. Hence, the wandering of Amoret and Britomart offers us some delectation among the gory action sequences. After witnessing severe dangers it is humorous to find Amoret’s ungrounded fear when approached by Britomart in disguise. (IV.i.5)

However, Amoret’s miseries are not about to end yet: upon meeting her loved Scudamour, Amoret totters into the cave of the savage man, and finally causes turmoil with accepting the consolation of gentle Timias, who was her sister’s, Belphebes suitor. Although this plotline appears to highly resemble Florimell’s, even in her faults, Amoret’s responses to abuse are more determined, her behaviour displays more self-awareness. According to McManus, Amoret’s composite manners are because of her keenness to charm Scudamour: “Amoret, a composite of all feminine virtues, including shame fastness, cheerfulness, modesty, and courtesy, must somehow enact them as well as the more overt sexual drive of both Venuses; she must employ seemingly contradictory behaviors that will lure and rebuff Scudamour simultaneously.”²¹⁸

Despite all her efforts, this conscious and courageous behaviour is not awarded

²¹⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 186.

²¹⁸ McManus. *Reading of Women*, 160.

with satisfaction. In their last mutual scene a barrier of fire separates Amoret from Scudamour, which Frye interprets as a form of intransgressible “sexual barrier.”²¹⁹ Una and Florimell were given the promise and potential of consummated love, but Amoret is deprived of it: she never sees her lover again. She vanishes from the plot.

In Book III Britomart’s plot – similarly to Amoret’s – is also enhanced by analepses. In the beginning of Book III, she appears as an invincible warrior. First we see her from Guyon’s perspective: he “spide a knight, that towards pricked faire / And him beside an aged Squire there rode.” (III.i.4.) That is Britomart and her nurse Glauce. Here the heroine does not possess even a touch of femininity. When Guyon threatens her she knocks him off his horse. Even if at this point he is not aware of the fact that he was defeated by a woman, neither is the reader. Masculine personal pronouns deceive us. This gender-alternation regarding the descriptions of Britomart characterizes the entirety of Book Three: she is depicted from various points of view, in which the belief of the person through whose perspective we see dominates, hence is she seen male and female, correspondingly. Retrospectively, we are given an account of the birth of Britomart, as the warrior “damsel” in Canto ii, as she looked into a magic mirror made by Merlin, in which she saw the image of a knight. The sight makes her feel restless and disturbed, soon she recognises that she fell in love. Merlin reveals the name of the knight: Artegall, and their common future of founding a dynasty. As a response, Britomart avenges the knight, who has done her “foule dishonour”. She decides to take on arms and dress like a knight in order to enable herself to search for her love.

Comparing the first and the second cantos, a completely opposing image of Britomart unfolds. The reverse chronology makes the contrast especially striking: initially we see the corollary, and only later we are given the reason. In the first canto, we meet a

²¹⁹ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 200.

bellicose, self-assured Amazon; while in the second, there is an indecisive young princess, who after having seen the “strange knight” in the looking glass, falls into despair and melancholy. She is disturbed, she cannot sleep, she is confused, because she cannot name this illness. Her suffering makes her admit her strange condition to her nurse, Glauce, who is ready to give diagnosis: “Aye me, how much I feare, least loue it bee.” (III.ii.33) This statement makes it clear: love, in general, is not favourable. However, with some amendments it can be admissible: “But if that loue it be, as sure I read / By known signes and passions, which I see, / Be it worthy of thy race and royall sead.” (III.ii.33). However, since the nurse cannot name the knight, she cannot ensure his suitability; she finds it safer to dispel Britomart’s love. With various concoctions and magic spells, she attempts to clean Britomart’s body of the poisonous feelings, but the effort seems to be in vain. As a last resort, the princess is taken to Merlin, which finally, proves to be fruitful. The magician explains to Britomart that she cannot escape her fate, and has to face her demanding future. At this point Britomart suddenly finds her identity. She is resilient and determined enough to grow up to the challenge, and she understands that she is chosen, she will be the mother of future kings and monarchs.

Nevertheless, a glorious destiny cannot be attained effortlessly. She first has to accomplish a quest to find her destined husband and meanwhile gain experience. For this she has to abandon everything which defined her before: her class, her identity, her gender. From a girl she metamorphoses into a knight: “her Maides attire” “turne into a massy habergeon.” (III.iii.57) Merlin bestows her with a spear, which is “made by Magick”, and fully arrays her. Now the transformation is complete, she embarks on her quest as a warrior.

Thus, in due course, Britomart has to present herself as a male knight. Her new hardened and threatening appearance contains an inner significance. “Spenser’s armour is

the symbol of Apollonian externality, of strife and solar wakefulness. It ensures permanent visibility, personae hardened against their own sexual impulses.”²²⁰ Britomart has to forget and leave behind her innocent princess-self. Despite this decision, at the beginning of the lonely quest her identity is still in flux, as the incident in Castle Joyous shows. The warrior damsel reacts to Malecasta’s advances confused and embarrassed: she grabs her sword to attack her. Malecasta faints in shock. In this situation Britomart replies irrationally and vehemently to the unreasonable fear of an unarmed woman in a nightgown. The normally calm and sober Britomart acts abruptly.

Here the same kind of aggression can be sensed, as when Guyon destroyed the Bower of Bliss (II.xii). As with Britomart, Guyon’s violence was fuelled by frustration caused by decadence, and thus dangerous sexual practises, to which – both Guyon and Britomart – were unable to give logical and sapient answers. They feel that it is inappropriate what happens, yet they are too involved to reject these sexual advances calmly. Encountering Acrasia and Malecasta respectively from Guyon’s and Britomart’s point of view, one can clearly see their attraction. Along Paglia’s lines I am not stating that Britomart is fuelled by homosexual desire,²²¹ but even though she is not, she could still find Malecasta sexually alluring. Relying on information from the romance, this must have been her first sexual experience. The combination of Britomart’s callowness and Malecasta’s palpable excitement baffled the former, and resulted in a hasty and frustrated action. It seems that the role of the male knight is still slightly alien to Britomart. She still behaves as a woman, assuming to be the weaker, inferior party in a relationship. She cannot see herself as the more dominant – male like – autonomous personality.

Some cantos later (IV.v.) a more experienced, less unsure Britomart is delineated.

²²⁰ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 175.

²²¹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 181-182.

She ironically plays with, and is amused by Amoret, who fearing Britomart to be a male, expects unwanted sexual advances from “him.” Interestingly, it is Britomart, who not so long ago had similar fears, and forgets her earlier self. With Paglia's apt words “Britomart pursues her male impersonation beyond the strictly necessary.”²²² In Frye's symbolic explanation, Britomart's bleeding is also a reference of her soft womanly side: “Britomart, though as chaste as Belpheobe, is not vowed to virginity. Perhaps it is her accessibility to human emotions that is symbolised by the bleeding wound.”²²³

Another, more speculative interpretation of the episode is that although it remains unspoken, Britomart sees her earlier self in Amoret, and she wants to educate Amoret, and make her aware of real dangers, and that is the reason why she reveals herself willingly rather soon. But no matter which interpretation we find more acceptable, the emphasis remains on Britomart's altered behaviour. By this stage her improvement becomes undeniable. The occasionally tough and demanding challenges toughened her, ripened her and made her ready to finally meet her destined man, Artegall.

Having eliminated Radigund, Britomart completes her task of releasing Artegall from the Amazon's dungeon. However, this deed proves to be a rather painful experience: in Merlin's and Isis's prophecy and consequently in Britomart's fantasy her future spouse is a worthy masculine knight. However, instead of this, in the town of Radegund Britomart finds her once powerful paramour “disguiz'd in womanishe attire.” (V.vii.37). The sight of Artegall in female costume is so abhorrent to Britomart that she “turnd her head aside, as nothing glad, / To haue beheld a spectacle so bad.” (V.vii.38) Britomart's presence here has an effect somewhat similar to what Philippa Berry explained when talking about Shakespearean disfigured endings “at the level of plot the tragedies' female characters

²²² Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 182.

²²³ Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 83.

frequently disrupt the stability of masculine identity."²²⁴ The only difference is that Britomart went so unprecedentedly far that Artegall eventually became deprived of his masculinity.

Although Artegall is the title hero of Book V (Legend of Justice), Britomart plays a more active role, with her being strong, powerful, dignified, whereas here he is weaker, frail and humiliated. In relation to Artegall, Britomart's persona occasionally manages to break away from allegoric simplicity, and become a more realistic entity. For instance, when she hears about Artegall's captivity by Radigund, she has a jealous tantrum, and as she beholds him in feminine attire, she indignantly turns away: "I see thy pride is nought." (V.vii.40) We shall note here the accumulating nature of images connected to 'pride', and their divergent tendency. Radigund's most criticised characteristic is her pride. ('Proud' being her epic attribute in V.v.26, V.v.28, V.v.40, V.vii.32, V.vii.33, V.vii.41.) On the other hand, the quotation (V.vii.40) above indicates that a lack of pride in a male makes him undesirable, and exiles him from the realm of exemplary masculinity.

After Britomart has gained reassurance in Isis's church, she returns to her chief goal to fight Radigund and free Artegall. From the omnipotent narrator, we are provided with an insight into the state of mind of Radigund – which is contrary to conventional female behaviour:

Whereof when news to *Radigund* was brought,
Not with amaze, as women wonted be,
She was confused in her troublous thought,
But fild with courage and with ioyous glee,
As glad to heare of armes, the which now she
Had long surceast, she bad open bold. (V.vii.25.1-6.)

Radigund is not overwhelmed with wonder rather thrilled and galvanised by

²²⁴ Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings - Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10.

overcoming her next potential victim – since the news reported an “yron man” approaching. Prior to the fight, there is slight retardation, an image of tranquillity, filled with suppressed tension and anticipation: Britomart sleeps during the night, and “the morrow next, so soone as dawning light / Bad doe away the dampe of drouzie sleepe, / The warlike Amazon out of her bowre did peepe.” (V.vii.26) The bright, shining Apollonian image of Radigund is marred with a wet chthonian sexually marked Dionysian side. And this is the feature which makes a clear cut distinction between the two ostensibly alike female figures: they share similar bodily traits, - athletic bodies, heavy blonde hair, strong, yet beautiful countenance – however, despite her doubts and hesitation, Britomart never resides in the chthonian sphere. She is destined to be exposed to the sun, and even if not, she is striving for it, contrary to Radigund’s shining, glittering façade that conceals deep faultiness, on account of which she has to perish. An unchivalrous battle occurs between Britomart and Radigund, (“all the grassie flore / Was fild with bloud, which from their sides did flow,” (V.vii.31)) which ends with Britomart’s cruel triumph over Radigund: “so rudely on the helmet smit / That it empierced to the very braine.” (V.vii.33)

With the overthrow of Radigund, the threat to the established masculine paradigm is over. Ironically it is Britomart, a woman who restores law and order as she becomes the princess of Amazons. “The liberty of women did repeale, / Which they had long vsurpt; and them restoring / To mens subiection, did true Iustice deale.” (V.vii.42) Moreover “...all those Knights, which long in captiue shade / Had shrowed bene, she did from thraldome free; / And magistrates of all that city made, And gaue to them great living and large free” (V.vii.43). Similarly to pride, freedom is another attribute whose possession is shameful for women. For females, independence often equals having fallen, whereas for men it is a sign of strength. These “rules” depict a world which is complete and is in harmony with the universe if men are proud and free, and women are humble and

restrained.

Even Britomart, one of the most powerful heroines conforms to this habit: although after becoming a princess in the town of Radegund, she is served by the magistrates. “There she continu’d for a certaine space” (V.vii.45), and then proceeded to fulfil her task to marry Artégall and bear a noble offspring, who will sustain the endurance of her imperial lineage. As Paglia acknowledged “Spenser values courage and confrontation.”²²⁵ However, this statement is only true with some amendment. The extent of female freedom can never exceed the socially accepted level, it has to stay within the borders of socially prescribed behaviour.

With the portrayal of Britomart, Spenser seemingly offers an alternative lifestyle for noble, single women: she is depicted as a longing young lady, as an independent female warrior, as a decisive mistress, and as a female ruler. All the roles Britomart played suggest that a life, other than subjugation themselves to male rule is possible for women. However, these episodes will only make the completion of Britomart’s fate even more marked. After successfully operating in a male-dominated world, Britomart willingly gives up her liberty, and fulfils her role as an obedient wife and mother, thus conforming to the role contemporary conduct books assigned to their female readers. Britomart’s obedience and final status reinterprets her previous actions. Her martial virtues shall not be read literally, but allegorically, as a (typical) woman’s way to reach perfection.²²⁶

Purity is the obvious trait, which chaste women have in common. However, this purity manifests itself in numerous forms and to various extents. Some of the ladies’ chastity is indubitable, while others have to struggle to prove and maintain it. The former are above all temptations, worldly joys apparently leave their abstemiousness unaffected

²²⁵ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 184.

²²⁶ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 105.

(for instance Mercilla, Gloriana or Medina). On the other hand, the latter group's perseverance is repeatedly challenged. Their purity is not taken for granted, with great struggles they continuously have to display their chastity and ascertain that they do not violate any social code. As Caroline McManus remarked "[e]ven when characters are situated in an unmistakable romance world, they are constantly pressured by the strict sexual standards (...) in which a woman's sexual integrity is largely a matter of public construction and reconstruction."²²⁷ To highlight this, it is enough to remember the narrator's disapproving comments about Una, Florimell, Belpheobe or Amoret's hesitant behaviour. In this world even respectable women's chastity is challenged, not without reason, though. The mini fables which illustrate their portraits show that chastity is not an easy virtue to keep, and also accentuate that this strenuously preserved purity is more venerable than the celibate, asexual, inborn one. As McManus noted through their equivocal description Spenser manages to capture an ambivalent concept of women: his "descriptions of innocent, loving ladies caught in morally compromising situations are marked by subtle ambiguities that manage both to condone and condemn female behaviour."²²⁸ The borderline position of these virtuous women colours their characters with more lively, earthly tones, since the proximity of sin comes with its own vivacity.

Nevertheless, despite this slight dubiousness, these women, without exception, manage to keep their purity. Although sin and temptation lure them, they remain untainted. It is as if in these situations they heard the slightly scolding voice of the narrator, and improved accordingly. Thus their stories are genuinely riveting: they set an example of feminine development, along the standards stipulated by males. Hence we can agree with Thompson that "[c]hastity is not a given element of the female identity but it is a virtue

²²⁷ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 183

²²⁸ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 183

which is culturally constituted.”²²⁹ Therefore, women are reminded of the vulnerability and volatility of their reputation, and to the watching eye of patriarchal society.

Although women in the romance are able to pay heed to male stipulations, they are not awarded with any gratification: in the romance there is not a single couple whose relationship is fulfilled, and who can dissolve in blissful marriage. Only promises and hints are given, fulfilment is infinitely deferred. The excuse for this suspension is a recurring conflict: the knights always have further noble quests ahead of them, thus they abandon their painfully obtained fiancées. While for females there is no reward, for males the reward is a new challenge and potential victory ahead. As Fletcher has noted, “[t]here is no such thing as satisfaction in this world; daemonic agency implies a *manie de perfection*, an impossible desire to become one with an image of unchanging purity.”²³⁰

ii. Temptresses

Observing inherently evil female characters of *The Faerie Queene* we feel that not much variety is offered. As Angus Fletcher realizes, “when major characters ‘generate’ sub characters, fractions of themselves, these fractions have peculiar causal interrelations.”²³¹ We have the abstemious hags with hideous appearances, occasionally with the ability to conceal their unsightliness. As Northrop Frye also concluded, “there is a good deal of inorganic repetition especially in the symbols of evil.”²³² To avoid repetition I chose to

²²⁹ Thompson, *The Character of Britomart*, 4.

²³⁰ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 64.

²³¹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 182.

²³² Frye, *Fables of Identity*, 70.

concentrate merely on the most emblematic figures. The temptresses are going to be introduced according to their wickedness. The list is going to begin with Duessa, the classic embodiment of female evil, and she will be followed by women, who are sinful to a lesser extent. The last figure discussed will be Radigund, whose personality borders on the acceptable rebellion of middle women.

Duessa, the complex epitome of monstrosity, is the most consistently re-appearing character of the entire romance. Her consecutive appearances in Books I, II, IV and V make her figure especially memorable. As her subtly speaking name, 'doubleness' suggests she is capable of disguising herself. She is able to transform according to what kind of value she intends to undermine. With her charming and virtuous hue, she manages to disrupt – or at least confuse – Redcrosse's chastity. Despite the warning of the 'talking forest,' who are all Duessa's victims, Redcrosse lets himself be deceived and led astray by her tempting alter ego, Fidessa, as if he consciously chose to be blind. According to Suttie, this deliberate naïveté stems in Fidessa's resemblance to Una. "Duessa, when Redcross first speaks with her, backs up her assumed appearance with an account of herself which, with its emphasis on high birth and chastity, makes her seem a complete substitute for the disgraced Una precisely on the secular-romantic moral terms on which he is already operating."²³³ Fidessa/Duessa's confession-like recollection is definitely reminiscent of Una: she is also "the sole daughter of an Emperor," (I.ii.22) she has her destined husband (who – unlike Una's, is killed I.ii.23), and she has to go through calamities to find his (dead) body. Although this story seems cleverly invented to delude Redcrosse, and evoke pity in him, it has references which could betray Fidessa's dubious origin, and enforce the suspicion the talking trees conjured. Fidessa refers to her father as the Emperor who "the wide West vnder his rule has, / And high hath set his throne, where *Tiberis* doth pas."

²³³ Suttie, *Self-Interpretation*, 111.

(I.ii.22) With the emphasis on the western territory (in opposition to Una's father, whose kingdom expands from east to west (I.i.5)), and with mentioning the river Tiber these lines strongly allude to papacy, which references and reminiscences in course of the romance are handled with negative judgement. Book I of Chastity is especially abundant in Catholic references, whose close connection to Duessa also display their threatening nature (canto iii, the House of Abessa and Kirkrapine; cantos iv-v, the House of Pride episode; and canto viii in Orgoglio's House, where Duessa appears on a many-headed beast). In Book I Duessa emerges as the embodiment of deceit and multiplicity whose main aim is to undermine Protestant chastity. In her further appearances her skill to mislead even the most level-headed knights with her smooth, convincing words will be dominant. Her exceptional eloquence is already proven at the end of Book I. As Redcrosse and Una get betrothed Duessa's rhetorically well constructed letter arrives (I.xii.26-28) in which she claims Redcrosse to be her fiancé: "To me sad mayd, or rather widow sad, / He was affiaunced long time before (...) Therefore (...) mine he is". From now on her persuasiveness as her major threatening weapon keeps re-appearing. Right at the beginning of Book II of Temperance, in canto i she manages to mislead Guyon to such an extent, that she almost convinces the knight to murder Redcrosse. Thus merely with words she manages to stagger Guyon's temperance. With a similar technique she also questions the friendship of Amoret and Britomart, Britomart and Scudamour, and spousal friendship of Amoret and Scudamour. (IV.i.) Here just to generate vengeance and jealousy in Scudamour, Duessa tells Scudamour, who does not know the female knight's true gender, that she witnessed Britomart courting and sleeping with Amoret. (IV.i.46) The moment of truth only comes when finally, in the Book V of Justice Duessa is summoned to Mercilla's court, from where there is no escape for her. Despite all of Duessa's sins, her conviction is not self-explanatory. For Mercilla violence cannot happen without profound justification. Here the

explanation is Duessa's inability to change and improve. She has already been caught in Book I, canto viii, when she was disrobed, and her true, inherent ugliness was revealed, but even humiliation and physical punishment failed to have any positive effects on her. She seems to mean a greater threat to law and order than taking the risk of offering her another chance for development. Duessa embodies all the darkness and evilness of the world, which, because of its mutability is able to invisibly taint everything and everybody. "For she could d'on so manie shapes in sight, / As euer could Cameleon colours new; / So could she forge all colours, saue the trew." (IV.i.18) Duessa is the archetypical evil, whom Frye associates "with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age."²³⁴

Although Duessa is the most major evil in the entire romance, her analysis does not exhaust the category of condemned women in this fairy world. There are other females who prove to be sinful in another way. They are not hideous, on the contrary, rather feminine and beautiful. However, they are not harmless by any means: these alluring temptresses can charm even steadfast men into oblivion. Their authorial judgement is complex and ambiguous: they are supposed to be hated, but their individuality, strength and pulchritude receive some (probably involuntary) touches of reverence.

Acrasia - with her affiliates - the major figure of luring temptresses embodies different kind of danger than Duessa. Her figure is morally complex and arbitrary and, her exquisite beauty makes her almost impossible to loathe. Her appearance is preceded by a long prelude. On his way to Acrasia, Guyon's temperance is continuously challenged by his encountering enchanting females, all foreshadowing the main temptress, Acrasia. The first of these challenges is Phaedria.

Being epitome of improper behaviour, the enchantress Phaedria has the liberty of taking the initiative. However, her sexual appetite does not devour all accessible men,

²³⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 187-188.

rather selecting the handsome ones to seduce. Old and unattractive, Atin and the Palmer are barred from Phaedria's boat: "Atin by no way / She would admit" (II.vi.4), "... the Blacke Palmer suffred still to stond, / Ne would for price, or prayers once afford, / To ferry that old man ouer the perlous foord." (II.vi.19) For her Epicurean soul, joy and delight are essential. Phaedria is neither material, nor cunning, hence not despicable, rather an advocate of light-hearted mirth and jocundity.

Although Phaedria is a prefiguration of Acrasia, she bears a major difference: while the latter is mute, she is endowed with exceptional verbal and poetic skills. To Guyon she whispers soothing Circean words when he discerns his threatened state on her isle.

Faire Sir (quoth she) be not displeased at all;
 Who fares on sea, may not command his way,
 Ne wind and weather at his pleasure call:
 The sea is wide, and easie for to stray;
 The wind vnstable, and doth neuer stay.
 But here a while ye may in safety rest,
 Till season serue new passage to assay;
 Better safe port, then be in seas distrest. (II.vi.23)

Her tender sentences uttered during Cymochles's and Guyon's jealous joust pacify the bloodthirsty knights: "...most noble Lords, how can / Your cruell eyes endure so piteous sight, / To shed your liues on ground?" (II.vi.32) Here Phaedria has the same soothing effect as what Medina had between Guyon and Sans loy in II.ii.34. As Schoenfeldt concluded, "Phaedria reverses the language of servitude that is normally deployed to describe the proper place of pleasure in the virtuous life."²³⁵ Phaedria manages to acquire that very same vocabulary, which is usually used by chaste characters, such as Medina.

²³⁵ Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves*, 43-44.

Yet, Phaedria's seduction does not remain on a verbal level, her passions are resolved by their physical consummation. Phaedria's total detachment from obligation, and her conviction that life is measured by how much delight and joy it offers, projects the most definite Epicurean ambience in the romance.

Apart from Phaedria, other female dwellers of the libidinous Bower of Bliss will display more enchanting softness and refinement, which will make them more irresistible. The next tempting challenge – again in the form of an attractive woman called Excess - arises at the entrance of the Bower.

On the porch of The Bower of Bliss, which "Archt ouer head with an embracing vine" (II.xii.54) "a comely dame did rest, / Clad in faire weedes, but fowle discorded, / And garments loose, that seemd vnmeet for womanhed." (II.xii.55) Even at first sight, the judgement is made: this woman is not respectable. Her oblivion, inactivity and especially her careless clothing trigger condemnation in the narrator (and presumably Guyon, since the two voices here are indistinguishable). And indeed her luscious appearance infers provocative behaviour. Guyon, who is still not familiar with this behavioural pattern, cannot handle open invitation, and gets embarrassed, and when Excess offers him a drink he hesitantly "taking it out of her tender hond, / The cup to ground did violently cast." (II.xii.57) Here Guyon does not display any wise temperance and withdrawal - his actions suddenly become violent and unpredictable.

Excess guides Sir Guyon to his next challenge, the fountain where two young girls are enjoying their joyful games. As Guyon glimpses the delightfully bathing nymphs, they instantly evoke attraction in him. This is one of the few instances in *The Faerie Queene* when a positive hero openly confesses his attraction and luscious thoughts: "His stubborne brest gan secret pleasurance to embrace." (II.xii.65) James Nohnberg noticed the significance of Guyon's weakness and its reference to his future violent actions at

Acrasia's. "A responsive chord is struck in Guyon, and we sense that the loss of inhibition anticipates the act of incontinence itself."²³⁶

Guyon does not leave the fountain-nymphs on his own account, proving to be too weak for that, but because the Palmer "much rebuked those wandring eyes of his" (II.xii.69). Guyon's succumbing to the fountain-girls is underscored by the images, metaphors and similes - since we witness them through the knight's perspective. Ostensibly the nymphs blush virtuously, although this action is there to divert attention from another act: "Withall she laughed, and she blusht withal, / That blushing to her laughter gaue more grace, / And laughter to her blushing, as did fall" (II.xii.68). From these lines, the nymphs can be gleaned as possessing the kind of careless joy and tenderness that can never be experienced when observing virtuous women. As McManus remarked, this whimsical behaviour is in contrast not only with other women, but with Guyon himself as well. "Spenser gives "to female characters like Phaedria and the nymphs of the fountain in the Bower of Bliss senses of humour that range from giggling silliness to ironic mockery of Guyon's solemnity. (II.vi.3)"²³⁷

In this episode with the nymphs, the opposing ideas are apparent. Individual temptation fights with the romance's intended message, uniquely without giving a final answer. Thus the episode remains a beautiful celebration of playful, bodily beauty, a flirt without any seriousness, tainted only with a touch guiltiness.

As Mary Ellen Lamb concluded, Guyon's corruption has already begun en route to the Bower. "The dangerous route to Acrasia's floating island itself eloquently conveys anxieties over the watery dissolution of the masculine self."²³⁸ The process of Guyon's loss

²³⁶ James Nohrberg, *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 489.

²³⁷ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 166.

²³⁸ Lamb, *Popular Culture*, 184.

of identity reaches its climax in Acrasia's close vicinity.

Acrasia, the most charming and voluptuous, hence the most dangerous woman of the romance appears after much foreshadowing and suspension. After numerous adventures which mostly serve as preparations for the final challenges, Guyon comes across Acrasia in the final canto of Book II. Her perilous nature is first referred to in Book II canto i by Amavia, whose husband, Mortdant had fallen victim to the enchantress. In "her" canto her characteristics can be well deduced, but if we recall the dying Amavia's words, a ready-made condensed delineation is given. "*Acrasia* a false enchaunteresse, / That many errant knights hath foule fordonne: / Within a wandering Island , that doth ronne / And stray in perilous gulfe, her dwelling is (...) Her blisse is all in pleasure and delight / Wherewith she makes her louers drunken mad, / And then with words & weeds of wondrous might, / On them she workes her will to vses bad." (II.i.51, 52)

It is also clearly stated that Acrasia is the embodiment of intemperance, since Amavia defines her poison as "drugs of foule intemperance (II.i.4)", and also, her name derives from the Greek *acrasia* meaning 'without control' (thus being intemperate), and on this account, she becomes Guyon's antithesis. If Guyon is temperance and sensibility, then Acrasia is decadence and art. These qualities are also manifest in her splendid surroundings. Despite the Bower of Bliss being the epitome of sin, the way it is presented conveys and triggers enjoyment and awe, probably unintentionally. As Rufus Wood warned us, "[t]he poem's iconoclastic responses to the overwhelming experience presented in the Bower of Bliss cannot destroy the realization that no matter how hard the poet strives to sanctify the language of allegory, it may still elicit an idolatrous response in the reader."²³⁹

As Sir Guyon gets closer to Acrasia the Bower becomes increasingly lavish and in

²³⁹ Wood, *Metaphor and Belief*, 26.

parallel, the sounds of nature become amplified. “The ioyous birdes shrouded in chearefull shade, / Their notes vnto the voyce attempted sweet; / Th’Angelicall soft trembling voyces made / To th’instruments diuine response meet” (II.xii.71) Even the inanimate noises employed to a rhythm, become heightened and conjure a sense of harmonics. “The siluer sounding instruments did meet / With the base murmure of the waters fall: / The waters fall with difference discreet, / Now soft, now loud, vnto the wind did call: / The gentle warbling wind low answerd to all.” (II.xii.71) As Anne Treneer’s apt comparison says “Spenser can make us hear the strange kind of harmony as though he held a shell to our ear and we listened.”²⁴⁰

This exquisite harmony reaches its climax when Guyon glimpses Acrasia, as if she were the source of the magical music: “There, whence that Musick seemed heard to bee, / Was the faire Witch her selfe now solacing / with a new Lover.” (II.xii.72)

After this exposition imbued with sound references the realization that Acrasia is, in fact, mute, is unforeseen and astounding. But indeed, unlike other enchantresses in the romance, Acrasia never speaks. Her wiles are exercised through her physical beauty and her artfully sensuous environment. While Acrasia caresses her lover, Verdant, a song is sung. The source of the melody is mysterious, and we only know that “some one did chaunt this louely lay.” (II.xii.74)

The song of the rose (II.xii. 74-5) is an exquisite image of her charms and the archetypal fear from the loss of one’s beauty and youth.

Ah see, who so faire thing doest faine to see,
In springing flowre the image of thy day;
Ah see the Virgin Rose, how sweetly shee
Doth first peepe forth with bashfull modestee,
That fairer seemes, the lesse ye see her may;
Lo see soone after, how more bold and free

²⁴⁰ Spenser, *Variorum*, II. 31.

Her bared bosome she doth broad display;
Loe see soone after, how she fades, and falles away.

So passeth, in the passing of a day,
Of mortall life the leafe, the bud, the flowre,
Ne more doth flourish after first decay,
That earst was sought to decke both bed and bowre,
Of many a Ladie, and many a Paramowre:
Gather therefore the Rose, whilest yet is prime,
For soone comes age, that will her pride deflowre:
Gather the Rose of love, whilest yet is time,
Whilest louing thou mayst loued be with equall crime. (II.xii. 74-75)

These lines can be interpreted as Acrasia's apologies and reason for her lewdness. In stanza 74 we hear the condensed archetypal history of a woman's life, or maybe even Acrasia's own life. The approach is merely physical, lacking any kind of spiritual aspect: the innocent curiosity of the Virgin Rose (this image evokes the Virgin Mary), and her maintained chastity of early youth, then her boldly bared bosom, followed by the decay and downfall. The end of this stanza contains strong ambiguity concerning the causality of the events. First we might assume that the "rose's" downfall happens because of her lost chastity, and lack of virtue. However, the downfall – and the second, 75th stanza enforces that - can be a natural event. In this case the "open bosom" is approved, and even encouraged. The song advises young ladies to display their beauty, while they have it, since youth is so transient. Stanza 75 is a fearful lament about the loss of a woman's prime, and the persuasion of welcoming paramours as long as they willingly come.

Even though these lines are not sung by Acrasia herself, the thoughts about an ephemeral rose and the sumptuous tone of the song evoke her. Especially, because these images appear as a result of her soft sighs: "she sighed soft, as if his [Verdant's] case she rewd" (II.xii.75)

Although it is stated that Acrasia is silent, the carpe diem song and the celebration

of bodily joys can only belong to her. As if merely with her presence, she could transmit her essence to us, he is so strongly present that without uttering them aloud, we can still comprehend her thoughts.

This way, without words, her power is even stronger. Speech, which is earthly, refutable and controllable does not taint her instinctive eroticism. Her deeds do not need much explanation in the romance world: here innate actions represent stronger temptation, and words would only mitigate their luscious energy. Words are signifiers of the reasonable; silence of the instinctive. Acrasia's silent sensuality is marked by passivity rather than any strong passion. In contrast to her inertness, it requires large amounts of energy from Sir Guyon to attempt to preserve his chastity and temperance. His struggle against the inviting artificial beauty of the Bower becomes desperate and frustrated.

This enchanting place and its enchanting ruler, saturated with art, refinement and sensuousness, ignites aggressiveness in Guyon. Chamberlain rightly tackles Greenblatt's interpretation of the destruction of the Bower of Bliss. He explains that despite Greenblatt's apparent defence of the Bower (and the whole poem), his arguments undermine themselves. Analysing Greenblatt's reasoning for Guyon's destruction of Acrasia he points out:

Greenblatt sees Guyon's acts of violence as emblematic of civilisation's foundation upon repression of instinctual and especially erotic desire. (...) Despite his initial celebration of the aesthetic, therefore, his reading of the poem is the opposite of a 'pastoral' one. For him, loss of aesthetic freedom is the 'tragic cost' of modern individualistic identities. Subjectivity is constituted by the imposition of power and the annihilation of the other.²⁴¹

For Chamberlain, Greenblatt's approval of violence for the sake of 'self-fashioning' is unacceptable. Slightly simplified, we can conclude, that in this argument Greenblatt is on Guyon's side, while Chamberlain on Acrasia's (hence on art's). It is also

²⁴¹ Chamberlain, *Radical Spenser*, 70.

important to note in Greenblatt's theory that he expands the scope of his analysis: identifying Guyon with the author and more abstractly with England.²⁴²

Although Greenblatt's ideas are unquestionably intriguing, perhaps a less political, more humane (or even psychological) reading of this episode offers a more universal, wider scope of understanding. Prior to arriving in the Bower of Bliss, Guyon has encountered other temptations which he could handle confidently, either with indifference or firm but calm rejection. But here he cannot act either way, his indignation being stronger than his primary characteristic of temperance, and hence, acts violently. Thus, although the eventual physical victory is Guyon's, we shall not fail to notice that Acrasia's achievement is almost as significant, as she manages to make the knight's identity vanish: he loses his emblematic temper, brutally and joyfully destroying all of the garden's artistic beauty – without apparent reason, since Acrasia is already his captive. Without going too far in the perilous grounds of psychology, it can be stated that frustration often stems in irresolvable temptations, which ignite unwanted feelings. Acrasia pleases Guyon's senses, charms him, evokes lustful thus sinful thoughts in him, and even jealousy when he sees Verdant who enjoys all the condemnable depths of sweet sin. The fact that Guyon will never be able to experience such forbidden delights is enough to cause outrage to such an extent, that he mercilessly destroys everything:

But all those pleasant bowres and Pallace braue,
Guyon broke down, with rigour pittillesse;
Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue
Them from the tempest of his wrathfulnesse,
But that their blisse he turn'd to balefulnesse:
Their grouse he feld, their gardins did deface,
Their arbers spoyle their Cabinets suppressse,

²⁴² Greenblatt's theory: Greenblatt interprets the destruction of the Bower of Bliss as a representation of colonial power. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2005), 172-174, 182 -188.

Their banquet houses burne, their buildings race,
And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place. (II.xii.83)

After capturing Acrasia and depriving her of her enchanting power, Guyon benevolently liberates all of Acrasia's male victims. They are fairly numerous - which again raises the question of blaming their miserable state on Acrasia. Upon entering the garden, Guyon went through many challenges: meeting monsters, sirens, tempting beautiful girls, and physical obstructive gates. All these imply that one has to be determined and willing to enter the Bower of Bliss, and that men were not taken in without their consent. Although it is emphasised that the males' long indulgence of unrestrained appetites finally disillusion and destroys any wish to live, the main blame is still the women's: they are culpable on the grounds of being beautiful and attractive. Except for Phaedria (who actively physically pursues Guyon), the other girls merely use their eyes, their smile, their bodies to charm. And the men succumb to it. However, they are forgiven, whereas the temptresses are not. This attitude of Spenser's closely corresponds with the rules of conduct books: there as well women are advised to hide their allure otherwise they violate the „laws” of proper behaviour. Thus, temperance is hard to attain partly because few want it. Spenser's test is to convey a sense of the artificiality, passivity, and obsessiveness of the intemperate spirit, while at the same time recognizing and depicting its considerable charms.

The females of the Bower of Bliss are different manifestations of the same idea, and centre on the chief enchantress, Acrasia. And indeed the four ladies (regarding the two girls in the fountain as one phenomenon) appearing in this episode are so closely intertwined, that their interpretation, and Guyon's relationship to them can profoundly only be analysed in the light of the other characters. There is fluctuation and graduation, graduation in the refinement of their manners, and fluctuation regarding Guyon's

perception of them. Phaedria is presented with two faces: initially Guyon falls for her, thus she is depicted as tender, gentle and charming, but after gaining experience Phaedria is seen as loose and, base. The charmingly feminine Excess seems suggestive, less rude, yet obviously provocative. The anonymous girls in the fountain are characterised as playful, poetic, graceful and never obtrusive or offensive. Finally, Acrasia is the embodiment of refined, mannered art and sophistication. Although Guyon meets these increasingly elegant variants of lewd behaviour, his personal learnedness and education is not in proportion with his experiences. His judgement is surprisingly subjective, an example being that as the women get more cunning, beautiful and dangerous, his condemnation and hatred does not grow, his emotional response to the women are varied: he gets disillusioned and indifferent to Phaedria; nervously angry with Excess; enchanted by the nymphs; and violently aggressive with Acrasia. All of the women want the same, however, the way they are judged is not identical, it is not based on the same evaluating rules of Guyon's. More abstractly: to be judged positively women have to conform to a set of rules, however, if they fail to do so, men have the right and power to exempt a few "worthy" ones from the behavioural code, and regard them as proper without meeting the requirements. Yet, this judgement is subjective, it does not apply to whole groups behaving in the same way, and it does not necessarily involve social acceptance as well. But all in all, although men oblige women to behave in a certain proper way, they also have the power to interpret and handle a few exceptional ones according to a different moral system.

Women of the Bower of Bliss are not affected either by men's lenience or their unfavourable judgement. They form a strong isolated unit above and outside social norms. They gain their energy from each other. Their integrity is attractive, and from a male point of view, they are infuriatingly untouchable. They form some of the few women whom Paglia deems strong and autonomous: women are "in Spenser's Bower of Bliss, enclosed,

comfortable, and dangerous.”²⁴³ The adjectives describing them in this sentence, semantically are not in a complementary relationship, rather in a causative: their dangerousness and power derives from their isolated, self-contained concentrated femininity.

In the row of increasing temptations, Acrasia is bestowed with the most irresistible beauty, thus, the most power. In Acrasia we see that stereotypical mystic, amplified power men attribute to women, deeming themselves as the passive prey of their charm, against which men feel useless. The only way to get rid of temptations triggered by Acrasia is either to surrender and sink into oblivion or to act aggressively. Nohnberg reveals the paradigmatic nature deriving from common human responses behind this act of demolition. “Spenser’s sequence – through pleasure, indulgence, excess, abandon, consent, passion, awakening, and self-reproach – reveals the logic of surrender beneath the profusion of the Bower, and inevitably guides us to its destruction.”²⁴⁴

Hence, Guyon, the Knight of Temperance, though with a struggle, cannot let chthonian decadence rule. He must restore the warped order of the romance and rule out Dionysianism and replace it with hard clear Apollonianism. This incident of Guyon’s unreasonable anger stems not only in men wanting to regain their power over women, but also in the sky-cult regaining its power over the earth-cult, law over chaos and decadence. This romance is not misogynist, it merely loathes a certain type of woman. Only those females who threaten with excessive decadence are condemned: whose bodily functions are on display, who are impolitely too fertile, who multiply effortlessly, and who find pleasure in aimless delights.

Radigund, Britomart’s negative counterpart, is also one of the dubious women in

²⁴³ Camille Paglia, *Vamps and Tramps* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 82.

²⁴⁴ Nohnberg, *Analogy*, 498.

the romance. She is the queen of the Amazons, however, she is not indigenously one: she was not born as an Amazon, her hostility towards men is not without reason, her beloved Bellodant broke her heart, thus turning her into a fervent enemy of all men. Hence she is not a natural brute, but shrewd, intelligent, self-aware and lawful.

To take vengeance, the queen of the Amazons deprives men of their identity: she divests them of their power, i.e. castrates them, and in this effeminate state she forces them into positions traditionally reserved not only for women, but servants. “And then with threat / Doth them compel to worke, to earne their meat, / To spin, to card, to sew, to wash, to wring.” (V.iv.31) Thus on the imaginary social ladder, men are moved from one extreme to the other. Not only are they reversed on the gender-axis, but also on the vertical class-axis as they are removed from aristocratic territory to the low-class. Hence men lose what socially defines them. Indeed the Amazon queen seemingly knows very well how to make captured knights harmless (her enemies are only men of high class, lower classes are ignored). Having lost their arms, appearance “image” most of them lose their inner will-power, and consequently themselves. And if there were some who would attempt to rebel against their queen, their revolt is effortlessly suppressed, since “[n]e doth she giue them other thing to eat, / But bread and water, or like feeble thing, / Them to disable from reuenge aduenturing.” (V.iv.31.)

Radegone, her polis, is a closed space surrounded by walls. As the fight begins between the knights of Maidenhead and the Amazons, the warrior women leave their safe area, exit the gates and face the knights outside the walls, where no (active, masculine) male can enter their base. This circular, round-shaped enclosed city is a manifestation of femininity: a womblike space which is fiercely protected from masculine penetration – if it cannot be taken by force only tamed effeminate males are allowed to enter.

During a battle the Amazon queen has her eye on one victim, Terpin, whom she

needs to overpower and subdue: “Like a Lionesse at him she flew / And on his head-peece him so fiercly smit (...) She lightly to him leapt, and in his necke / Weening at once her wrath on him wreake, / And his contempt, that did her iudg’ment breake.” (39-40)

However, Terpin is not a worthy opponent as he is too weak to satisfy Radigund’s unrelenting anger. Artegall is a heftier challenger. Aggression and erotically charged tension intensify during the fight between Radigund and Artegall, yet it yields nothing for either party on the first day. Radigund found another man to subjugate, but this encounter is of more significance for Artegall: the Amazon queen is his first real challenger. Hence, here takes place Artegall’s initiation into knighthood and manhood. This process involves manifold deep changes on different social, physical, sexual and mental levels. In order to be able to step further in the direction of his fatal aim he has to come clear with himself, and find his own identity. To elevate into platonic heights he has to experience the extreme abyss of desperation.

Bearing the positive qualities of being a good queen, loving toward her people, responsible and sober-minded Radigund is not an evil witch like Duessa: “There she resolu’d her selfe in single fight / To try her Fortune, and his force assay, / Rather then see her people spoiled quight.”(V.iv.47) Radigund controls the fight: she decides how the battle shall continue, and she opts for a duel with Artegall. Radigund is also fair and wishes she wants to warrant fair chances to her opponent by sending “wine and iuncates fit” so that the knight will not starve before the joust. Although we expect Radigund to represent emasculated females, her caring actions and motherly behaviour stay inside traditional feminine territory. In this situation Radigund is controlling, active and giving. Artegall is confined to be subjected, passive and receiving, although, in opposition to Terpin, he is trying to rebel against his state.

Canto v begins powerfully with Artegall’s and Radigund’s heated duel with erotic

overtones “So did Sir Artegall vpon her lay (...) That flakes of fire, bright as the sunny ray, (...) so well her selfe she warded, / From the dread daunger of his weapon keene.” (V.v.8) At the beginning of the battle Artegall is more active, and attacks Radigund with his sharp sword. However, Radigund also proves that she is capable of action and this foreshadows the next canto when Artegall will be forced into a feminine role “With her sharpe Cemitare at him she flew, / That glauncing downe his thigh, the purple bloud forth drew.” (V.v.9) The sexual game of giving and receiving continues. Artegall grabs Radigund and knocks her over “on the grassie field.” (V.v.11) Still throbbing with rage Artegall leaps up to plunge his weapon into the prostrated queen. Nevertheless, as soon as he glimpses her breathtakingly beautiful countenance, all his anger vanishes. Normally we are given female bodily descriptions along with the facial traits (which usually involves internal characteristics as well), but as we have experienced in Radigund’s case these two are separate. The reason for this split is that the narration follows Artegall’s perspective. We explore Radigund’s body from his perspective. “In her faire visage voide of ornament, / But bath’d in blud and sweat together ment;” (V.v.12) In this post-coital position Artegall is lured by Radigund’s attractive body. Not only does his rage direct him, but he now also falls into another trap. Once ruled by his bodily needs, Artegall now yields to his senses. Radigund’s glowing beauty, which is corrupted by blood and bodily fluids, weakens and debilitates him. And as soon as he falls out of his role of the masculine, controlling knight Radigund takes advantage of Artegall and rises from her subjected position, and gains control again. The sexual game ends in an unfriendly, uncompromising way: Artegall is not a potential worthy enemy, and must be annihilated. He is symbolically castrated as Radigund breaks his sword.

Deprived of his weapon Artegall can enter Radigund’s realm. Inside her castle the knight witnesses a world which is utterly upside down: “braue knights” (V.v.22) perch

spinning and carding. They are fed very poorly: “nought was giuen them to sup or dyne, / But what their hands could earne by twisting linen twine.” (V.v.22) To demonstrate her massive indignation, or suppressed passion, towards Artegall Radigund places him on the lowest stool in the men’s sordid chamber. The narrator seems irritated even by reporting these events, and cannot help but re-emphasise the humiliating and unnatural nature of being a slave to a woman:

...they [=women] haue shaken off the shamefast band
With which wise Nature did them strongly bynd (...)
To purchase a licentious libertie.
But virtuous women wisely vnderstand,
That they were borne to base humilitie. (V.v.25)

It is not impossible that male servitude to women was considered a violation of the natural law. However, Spenser’s style at this point jolts, as normally he is very smooth and eloquent (despite being occasionally didactic), but here the lines rupture. The cadence of the previously quoted verse adds insult to injury, thus making an assumption that Spenser does not say what was on his mind. (It would be anachronistic to define it as irony, but perhaps ambiguous usage of a courtly cliché could aptly describe this line.) After denouncing women the narrator abruptly finishes the verse with excuses to the queen, elevating her above other females: “Vnlesse the heauens them lift to lawfull soueraintie.” (V.v.25) It is difficult to imagine a wider distance between the two lines of the couplet, which creates tension in an tedious misogynist stanza.

Meanwhile, Radigund’s physical aggression is transported onto an emotional level: “the warlike Amazon, / Whose wandring fancie after lust did range, / Gan cast a secret liking to this captiue strange.” (V.v.26) Similarly to Britomart, she falls prey to an unidentifiable, untraceable feeling, which cannot be controlled by human beings because of its transcendental, Platonic nature. Its symptoms are universal: “But it tormented her

both day and night.” (V.v.27) She wants to resist the centripetal energy of the feeling: “Yet would she not thereto yeeld free accord / To serue the lowly vassall of her might.” Only a few stanzas earlier, the same phrase appears, but there it is formulated in Artegall’s mind: “Yet he it [to become Radigund’s vassal] tooke in is owne selfes despite / (...) / Her vassall to become, if she him wonne in fight.” (V.v.23) Interestingly, the structures of the identical words also resemble each other: both begin with the same conjunction and then make use of one half of a conditional sentence. Both sentences also use the real conditional - indicating that they have not given up their struggle.

Eventually, Radigund’s character cannot exist in the Spenserian world: the main argument against her is not her activity and obstinacy (since Britomart also she possesses these traits), but her tendency to use these to subvert the inherent harmony and order of the world. By forcing men into a subservient position, commissioning them with female chores, and –what is the worse- humiliating them in womanly attires, clearly Radigund does not conform to the behavioural code of a noble, single woman – not even the code of a female ruler.

Radigund and Acrasia have represented women who trespass certain rules, for which they have been denounced. The sins of the ladies in the Bower of Bliss are temptation and lewdness, and Radigund’s, her pride and individualism. With these traits, they show a transition towards another group of women, those of a moral no man’s land. Some of them will show similar behavioural patterns to Radigund or Acrasia, however, the judgement on them will differ.

iii. Middle women

Viewing the women of *The Faerie Queene* from a distance outlines two distinct groups: there are the good, virtuous women and at the other extreme, the ill-willed, evil ones. Between these rather homogenous groups, a space is occupied with less delineated, less meticulously portrayed, almost invisible females. When reading the romance for the first time these characters might fail to catch our attention. Usually only after a second reading, when one becomes more open to less relevant details, we notice them. Once recognised, these women command our consideration: in opposition to the two other groups, whose moral state is obvious, the authorial judgement of these ‘middle women’ is ambiguous. They are neither too good, nor too bad, and not depicted in the detail we are accustomed to when women are introduced. Not much is said about the appearance of these women, blazon is avoided, and inner characteristics are not stated provisionally, and can only be deducted through the women’s actions, verbal reactions and behaviour. In terms of scope and depth they are fairly variable. Some of these women re-emerge in consecutive cantos, while others dominate only one episode; some are presented as mere sketches, and some are delineated with stronger contours. Morally, they have a wide range: from bordering on the virtuous to the nearly indecent. Because of their heterogeneity it is difficult to set up prerequisites for this ‘middle’ group of women. Only negative rules can define them and offer a compass to this study as: they neither belong to the grandiose chaste group of Spenserian heroines, nor to the condemnable. They inhabit a moral no man’s land. Without fully exploiting and probing the topic Caroline McManus tackled the matter: “Spenser’s poem (...) provide[s] extensive commentary on the range of social and sexual behavior expected of women who could not be so neatly pigeonholed and who often occupied the interstices of prescribed sexual categories, especially the liminal space

between complete naïveté and utter depravity.”²⁴⁵

These women’s presence is especially dominant in Book VI, where they even hinder the emergence of classic Spenserian heroines. Prior to that, only three middle women appear, in Book II, IV and V, where although their role is not negligible they do not eclipse their main counterparts, they rather show another aspect of them, or – in the case of Samient, serve as an extension of them.

Amavia, the first, and probably the most fallible and feminine of the middle ones, emerges as an addition and antithesis to the enchantress Acrasia. As we first glimpse Amavia lying wounded on the grass the tone of desperation and gloom is immediately set. This ambience is further intrigued by the sight of her husband, Mortdant, who even dying has sexual appeal:

Besides them both, vpon the soiled gras
The dead corse of an armed knight was spred,
Whose armour all with bloud besprinckled was;
His ruddie lips did smile, and rosy red
Did paint his chearefull cheeks, yet being ded,
Seemed to haue beene a goodly personage,
Now in his freshest flowre of lustie hed,
Fit to inflame faire Lady with loues rage,
But that fiers fate did crop the blossome of his age. (II.i.41)

At this point from a brutal yet decorous image Amavia turns into the narrator of past events. She reports how Acrasia seduced Mortdant into an adulterous relationship. Amavia disguising herself as a palmer sets out to find her husband. Coming across him, she realizes that her once true husband is “so transformed from his former skill, / That me he knew not, neither his own ill;” (II.i.54) However, Amavia’s matrimonial devotion is more powerful than lecherous passion: “through wise handling and faire gouernance, / I

²⁴⁵ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 154.

him recured to a better will, / Purged from drugs of foule intemperance; / Then meanes I gan devise for his deliuerance.” (II.i.54). The temptress’s vengeance proves to be more trenchant, having cursed the couple, causing their downfall.

Mortdant’s attraction both to Amavia and Acrasia illuminates the dichotomy between lechery and temperate marital love. Kaske goes as far as saying that “his failure to recognize Amavia, dramatizing the drug’s blockage of his reason, thus confirms that Amavia allegorizes reason.”²⁴⁶ Although Amavia definitely represents the other extreme in relation to Acrasia on our imaginary axis, she shall not be deemed as the allegoric representation of reason; her character is more controversial. Among her traits reason can be found, but this characteristic is far from being exclusive, as other features define her just as powerfully. Facts about her are not elaborated directly, but from textual implications much can be deducted. Acrasia’s character fills multiple roles. Her blood stains her “goodly garments” thus the assumption that she is of a rather high rank. This underscores Spenser’s tendency that he represents women only from higher classes as active, determinate and independent. Amavia has the courage to set off, fight for her husband, and instead of relying on divine justification she acts as only gods are entitled to by taking her own life. Being a loyal wife, Amavia’s affection towards Mortdant is her primary motivating force in that she is willing to – and she does – sacrifice everything, including her son and herself, for this sacred devotion. To this goal she employs her reason, symbolised by the “Palmer’s weed” (II.i.52) she wore at the beginning of her undertaking, and her womanly charm used to re-ignite Mortdant’s love. In addition to being a wife, she, although only for a short period, takes up the role of mother, since during her errand she undergoes an extremely painful childbirth (II.i.50). However, her motherly instincts do not prove to be as powerful as her spousal ones: prior to noticing Guyon’s presence she stabs

²⁴⁶ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 26.

herself leaving Ruddymane to his fate.

On this account instead of unequivocally regarding Amavia as a temperate character, her figure is more complex. Although to some degree she is temperate (e.g., when wearing the Palmer-robe she persistently seeks her husband), in other respects she fails to conform to this trait. The most conspicuous example is her death when not being able to handle her husband's loss, Amavia lacks the endurance to find another purpose in life, in the midst of deep despair, making her commit suicide.

In addition to her chastity, she bears traits which foreshadow the perilous enchantress, Acrasia. The setting of the scene recognizably alludes to Acrasia's Bower of Bliss:

His ruddie lips did smile, and rosy red
Did paint his cheaefull cheeks, yet being ded,
Seemed to haue beene a goodly personage,
Now in his freshest flower of lustie hed,
Fit to inflame faire Lady with loues rage,
But that fiers fate did crop the blossome of his age. (II.i.41)

Whereas in the Bower of Bliss: "There she had him now layd a slombering, / In secret shade, after long wanton ioyes" (II.xii.72). Both images depict a young woman in a fountain and a seemingly lifeless attractive male. From the distance no distinction can be made. Only upon closer inspection can the basic difference be noticed: in the Bower of Bliss, Acrasia and Verdant are in a soft, post-coital state, whereas the reason for Amavia's and Mortdant's docility is their impending death. In Schoenfeldt's interpretation this scene is also a proof for Spenser's handling spiritual and corporeal phenomena as cause and result: "The book at large is a series of responses to the congenital frailty of flesh, a frailty which is at once physiological and moral."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves*, 44.

However, the two images are each other's antithesis: Acrasia and Verdant's post-coital lassitude is in sharp and decadent contrast to the latter couple's grave exitus. Understanding these two juxtaposed pictures sheds light on so far undetected layers of both situations. These images reflect on the proximity of death and sexual satisfaction: instead of being repellent, both couples are depicted as decadently corporeal, yet beautiful. However, sexual pleasure still comes with the risk of death for Acrasia and Verdant. By comparing the two sets of images, the analogy of the Amavia-Mortdant and the Acrasia-Verdant episode is revealed: the horror of the former gains sensuality, while the latter's sensuality gains elements of horror. The border between death and fornication is blurred.

Although Amavia's omnipotent passion corresponds with Acrasia's fervour, their target and aim is dissimilar: with Amavia, only one person can trigger uncontrollable feelings, whereas Acrasia's zeal is impersonal. The object of her love is interchangeable. The former feeling is understandable, human; the latter, however, is a sign of irrational and insatiable "hunger", thus being perverse for "ordinary" human beings. On this account and with her devotion, chastity and intemperance, Amavia is a figure who is more than allegorical: a forerunner of the episodic characters of later novels²⁴⁸, and a life-like, credible woman of motivated, acceptable action.

This episode bears narrative significance. At Amavia's grave, Guyon swears to take revenge on Acrasia, and subsequently this fight and struggle will be the cohesive topic of Book II, making it thematically the most unified, succinct, and lustrous part. This quest is the only one in the romance whose driving force maintains its momentum until completion.

One should note how the question of blame and responsibility operates in various characters. Mortdant was seduced "For he was flesh: (all flesh frailtie breed.)" (II.i.52)

²⁴⁸ Thompson, *Character of Britomart*, 6.

Hence the responsibility is not the man's, but entirely Acrasia's. Similarly Guyon does not condemn Amavia for committing suicide, since he was merely "Accusing fortune, and too cruell fate, /Which plunged had faire Ladie in so wretched state." (II.i.56) Clearly these figures behave as human beings: their objectivity is overwritten by circumstances, and by their fondness or hatred of other characters. Their self-fashioning includes sets of beliefs and principles along which they not only act but also judge others' actions.

Although on the characters' level, no severe criticism is expressed, some judgement is implicitly transmitted. Not uniquely for Spenser the names speak for themselves, Mortdant is from the Latin 'death-giving',²⁴⁹ probably referring to the knight's excellent fighting skills, chivalry, and to invoke fear in his opponents. Paradoxically and tragically his name finally becomes the denotation of his indirect and involuntary, yet fatal and unquestionable destruction of his loved ones, his devout wife, and newly born male heir. Amavia failed to realize her husband's guilt, nevertheless, the suppressed and subtle condemnation of Mortdant's erroneous and concupiscent actions and weaknesses radiate through these lines. Amavia's etymology is 'I have loved'²⁵⁰ alluding to the distinctive trait, of her passion. Although Guyon is lenient towards Amavia, as well as to Mortdant, they are inherently disapproved of. Being an embodiment of intemperate love makes it impossible for Amavia to exist in the Spenserian world, where a mollifying force is indispensable to mitigate crude, instinctive feelings, which are deemed not only inappropriate, but even threatening to the harmony of social order. Even though some characters who act according to these inappropriate passions are apparently affable and acceptable, they are not given the right to live, to illustrate that any form of non-harnessed emotion is condemnable. Since they are virtually not sinners their annihilation does not

²⁴⁹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1109.

²⁵⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1109.

have to be brutal (as with the vile Acrasia), but instead, they shall rather be silently eliminated, wiped out, written out of the pages of society- thus out of this romance as well.

Our sense of Guyon's sympathy towards Amavia is also moderated, when he finds himself unable to allow her actions to go uncriticised, and his character is forced into the role of the "good", conformist Protestant knight. Although verbally he does not disapprove, his farewell to the dead Amavia does so. He – with the consent, or maybe encouragement of the Christian Palmer – deprives Amavia and Mortdant of a proper funeral. Instead, Guyon and the Palmer perform a beautiful, yet sacrilegious, pagan ceremony:

The great earthes wombe they open to the sky,
And with sad Cypresse seemely it embraue,
Then coureing with a clod their closed eye,
They lay therein those corses tenderly, (...)

The dead knights sword out of his sheath he drew,
With which he cut a locke of all their heare,
Which medling with their bloud and earth, he threw
Into the graue... (II.i. 60, 61)

Although the decorous nature of the rite has an aesthetic value, morally and theologically it cannot be deemed as proper, since it definitely goes against Christian values and traditions.

Aemylia, the mock heroine of Book IV of *Friendship* is – in some ways – a counterpoint of Amavia: while the former is fickle, the latter's sin is extreme loyalty. Aemylia's unsteady feelings also emphasise the constancy of Amoret's emotions. This assumption is enhanced by their physical proximity in the course of Book IV canto vii. Being kidnapped by a savage man, Amoret meets her in Lust's cave. In this situation, Aemylia, who has been held captive there for a longer period seems more adept, practical

and a natural survivor. She has spent twenty days in the cave and meanwhile “haue seen / Seauen women by him slaine, and eaten cleane.” (IV.vii.13) Amoret’s main distress, however, is not the loss of her life, but her chastity; Aemylia knowingly soothes Amoret’s worries about being abused by the lustful man: apart from them there is also an old woman there, who does not mind pleasing the savage: “For euer when he burnt in lustfull fire / She in my stead supplied his bestiall desire.” (IV.vii.19) Aemylia also tells to Amoret about her calamities, about how she lost her beloved husband, and how she was abducted by the evil man. Amoret has enough self-awareness to detect similarities to her story in this recollection: “Thy ruefull plight I pittie as mine owne.” (IV.vii.19.) The parallel of their destinies does not end here. After they separately manage to escape from the cave, we chance upon them in canto vii. Arthur finds them starving and miserable in the forest “Both in full sad and sorrowfull estate,” (IV.viii.19) and the three continue together – through other mishaps – to find the ladies’ knights (Amyas and Scudamour). In this book, whose thematic virtue is friendship, it is enthralling to see these two women, who are so alike in their appearance, principles, background and capabilities, sharing experiences without forming any amiable bonds. The most personal interaction between them is Amoret’s initial statement, when she noted their likeness. However, this ostensible indifference does not necessarily mean coldness or distrust. Much more probable here is that after their resemblance was revealed, they function as variants of the same story, hence, basically, as different manifestations of the same character. Their role is not to display the depth of friendship (they will do that with someone else, Aemylia with Poena, Amoret with Britomart), but the different responses to the same events by a worldly, fallible woman, and an outstanding heroine. To preserve her chastity, Amoret rather risks her life, and flees from the cave of lust, while Aemylia stays there (probably raped) and waits to be rescued. Amoret, lethally wounded continues her journey, Aemylia suffers

similarly just by hunger; Amoret remains loyal to her knight (whom she never sees again), Aemylia, merely in her mind, though, favours another man. However, despite Amoret being more righteous, it is Aemylia who is endowed with love and happiness. As we have seen earlier, Amoret's plot being unfinished, vanishes in the vastness of the romance.

Aemylia's and her friends' story also evokes the emblematic story of Cambell, Telamond, Canacee and Cambina, the main characters of Book IV. Both groups form unities of four, with interrelations between more members of the group: in the case of the major quartet Cambell is the husband of Cambina, who is the sister of Triamond, who is the husband of Cambell's sister, Canacee. In Aemylia's group, relations are also intertwined, but family ties do not appear. At the beginning of their plot Aemylia is the fiancée of Amyas, whose best friend is Placidus. (The two men's closeness is underscored by their identical looks). Poëana, the fair daughter of the giant, Corflambo lusts after Amyas, hence keeps him as her captive, and later for their resembling looks, captivates Placidus, who embarks on a dangerous journey to free his close friend. Simplifying the seemingly complex texture of emotions, we can state that Amyas is in the centre, and the other three are in love with him. The girls' love towards him probably does not need profound evidence, yet, Placidus's affections are rarely analysed and disambiguated. His devotion towards his friend, something similar to Shakespeare's Antonio's feelings for Bassanio is revealed by many of his actions. His ardent search for him (IV.viii.55); that he lets himself captivated just to be with him (IV.viii.57); the fact that he puts himself into danger for his sake (IV.viii.61), and his joy when seeing Amyas liberated from his dungeon are all clear signifiers of deep affection. The instance of reassembling is especially telling. Here Placidus behaves exactly as the amorous Aemylia:

Whom soone as faire *Aemylia* beheld,
And *Placidus*, they both vnto him ran,

And him embracing fast betwixt them held,
Striuing to comfort him all they can,
And kissing oft his visage pale and wan. (IV.ix.9)

At this point the dense web of emotions gets even more chaotic. While hugging in a threesome Aemylia suddenly notices the striking resemblance of the two men, and becomes fickly confused: in the heat of the moment she cannot decide which squire she finds more attractive:

She, though full oft she both of them had sene
A sunder, yet not euer in one place,
Began to doubt, when she them saw embrace,
Which was the captive Squire she lou'd so deare,
Deceiued through great likenesse of their face,
For they so like in person did appeare,
That she vneath discerned, whether whether weare." (IV.ix.10)

Evidently, with emotions like these it is impossible to please everyone, hence by the end of this plotline (end of IV.ix.) some authorial intervention is needed to disentangle the chaotic threads. Aemylia and Amyas are provided with satisfaction, whereas Placidas and the suddenly reformed Poeana – as remainders – are given to each other. The interchangeability of the object of one's love purely on account of their similar looks warns us of the arbitrary nature of human relationships, and even questions the reality and perfectness of the Cambell-circle.

Nevertheless, this minor plotline ends with a slightly forced, though optimistic ending. Especially regarding the sinful females: the voluptuous Aemylia, and even the wanton and cruel Poeana are forgiven and endowed with a conventionally content life. It is alarming to notice that while the stories of virtuous women such as Una's, Amoret's or Britomat's were deprived of happy completion, sinful or merely fallible women like Poeana and Aemylia are given their desired stability.

Aemylia's and Amyas's relationship has another aspect, which cannot be elaborated in depth in this canto, hence it will reappear again in Book VI in connection with Priscilla: the issue of women marrying below their rank. Aemylia refers to her elopement with Amyas being due to the impossibility of their marriage (IV.vii.15), and Amyas is often called as "Squire of low degree," but a solution is not given to this obstacle, circumstances do not seem to change, they merely get accepted, all of them are going to live on Placidus's land given to him by Arthur.

Samient also represents a missing aspect of major female characters: she functions as Mercilla's active, flexible and mobile self. Her matter-of-fact figure appears in the consecutive cantos of viii and ix in Book V of Justice, displaying a new type of woman. She is unique even among the middle women, which derives from her professional position: she is not defined by any relation to a man, (ostensibly lacking sexual drive), but by her profession, since she is the messenger of queen Mercilla. In fact, she is the only woman in the romance who is 'employed', and moreover, entrusted with high responsibility. She lives up to her position, in that from her brief appearance she comes across as articulate, adventurous and clever. In her presence even prominent men seem somewhat stolid: while both Arthur and Artegall wanting to rescue Samient, they attack each other. Furor aggravates and deafens the men to such an extent that if it was not for Samient's intervention, the fight would have been lethal.

They [Arthur and Artegall] drew their swords, in mind to make amends
/(...)/ Which when the Damzell, who those deadly ends
Of both her foes had seene, and now her friends
For her beginning a more fearefull fray,
She to them runnes in hast, and her haire rends,
Crying to them their cruell hands to stay,
Vntill they both doe heare, what she to them will say." (V.viii.10)

Samient's eloquence is proved by the lengthy narration (V.viii.17-23) about the

threatened state of Mercilla by the belligerent Souldan and his wife Adicia, and her mission to seek peace and initiate negotiations with the enemy. This account of Samient clearly displays moral gynephilia. Mercilla's land is threatened by "a mighty man, which wonnes here by / That with most fell despight and deadly hate" (V.viii.18), and although it is stated that his "bad wife" is also to be blamed for the enmity ("who counsels him through confidence of might, / To breake all bonds of law, and rules of right." V.viii.20), Mercilla entrusts Samient to approach Adicia "in friendly wise" to reach "finall peace" and "mutuall consent." It cannot escape our attention that despite their frailty, and even malignance women are expected to possess a significantly higher propensity for amicability than their male counterparts. At this point of the romance, peaceful and humane decisions, are favoured against unnecessary aggression. More feminine values, such as altruism and mercy are pushed to the foreground, at the expense of mindless brutality. Naturally, this milder tone does not involve the total elimination of violence: where words and wit fail, physical power still prevails. As Artegall, Arthur and Samient (disguised as their captive) enter Souldan's castle, they are faced with a violent attack, which can only be answered by attack. The outcome of this scene models the canto's general judgement of male-female culpability. While Souldan is destroyed, with a minor but surprising twist, focus is taken away from Adicia's eventual fate: in her frantiness she transforms into a tiger.

Book VI of *Courtesy* is the one which offers the most material for our search for women who belong neither to virtue, nor to evil. At this stage, the end of the grandiose fragment, the so far moralistic, didactic tone seems to exhaust itself, and gradually, silently give way to a more lenient undertone.

In Briana's and Crudor's story traces of this permissiveness can be detected. Although Briana violates the law of courtesy, she only does so to please her fiancé, who

would marry her only on condition of receiving a coat lined with human hair. Here, in Briana's case transferring blame works in her favour: Briana is exempted, while Crudor is punished, and - ironically - they are given the same treatment, and the same destiny: they have to marry each other.

Although Briana and Crudor are no threat to life, by shaving everyone's hair who goes past, they break the code of civility.

They saw that Carle [Maleffort, the servant] from farre, with hand vnblest
Hayling that mayden by the yellow heare,
that all her garments from her snowy brest,
And from her head her lockes he nigh did teare,
Ne would he spare for pittie, nor refraine for feare. (VI.i.17)

Depriving someone of her hair is tantamount to the deprivation of one's dignity,²⁵¹ which here in Book VI, the Book of Courtesy cannot remain unpunished. Both members of the couple are lectured and threatened, and Crudor is forced to marry Briana without a dowry – although we can debate the satisfactory nature of this "happy ending."

Blandina's and Turpine's episode in VI.vi also depicts a strange kind of relationship with unconventional moral judgement. The first reference of Turpine is in VI.iii., when he refuses to provide shelter to Calepine and the wounded Serena. To take revenge, Arthur, the epitome of all virtues, including courtesy, enters Malbecco's castle. While his sword bearer Savage Man fights with the forty warriors Malbecco set upon them, Arthur pursues the lord of the castle who fled into his mistress's, Blandina's chamber, where the Prince knocks him unconscious. Blandina, the loyal maid covers her lord with her skirt ("And with her garment couering him from sight, / Seem'd vnder her protection him to shroud" VI.vi.31), and begs Arthur for mercy. Blandina's plea seems to be both highly effective and affective, since Arthur spares Malbecco, but mysteriously and

²⁵¹ Cooper, *Traditional Symbols*, 77.

ambiguously spends the whole night with her. “The Prince himselfe there all that night id rest / Where him *Blandina* fayrely entertayned.” (VI.vi.41) Although providing no evidence, the narrator does not fail to add the tarnishing detail about Blandina being “false and fayned.” (VI.vi.42)

On this account Blandina can be dismissed as falsely flattering and fickle. Nevertheless, her attempt to save her paramour is still remarkable, and even selfless, and courageous. In the bedchamber scene she behaves not only as a faithful lover, but motherly traits can also be discovered. It is probably not accidental that from the enraged Arthur, Malbecco instinctively seeks protection in the safe, intimate and private closed space of Blandina. First she lets him enter her chamber, and then she entirely encloses him. She fully covers Malbecco with her skirt, she protects him with her body, he gets inside her contours as if he was immersed. Later we will see that Malbecco was not worthy of such an affectionate treatment: breaking all his vows he ends up being punished by being hung upside-down from a tree. Blandina, on the other hand, although scolded for flirting with Arthur, averts any major retribution. For her brief and merely implicated affair with Arthur Blandina is described as having “guileful wits to gudye.” (VI.vi.42) The narrator blames Blandina so ardently for wilfully attracting Arthur that he forgets that it was the prince who entered the mistress’s room: “and vp conuayd / Into the chamber, where that Dame remayned” (VI.vi.39). Blandina is condemned for being too studied in the art of love, however, objectively speaking, she causes no harm with her exceptional skills of pleasure: after demanding travels and fights, Arthur chooses to spend a night with Blandina, who makes the effort to please him: “With all the courteous glee and goodly feast, / The which for him she could imagine best.” (VI.vi.41)

The instance of Blandina makes the narrator contemplate on the mysterious nature of female attractiveness: “Whether such grace were giuen her by kind, / As women wont

their guilefull wits to guide; / Orlearn'd the art to please." (VI.vi.43) As Osgood stated, "in false courtesy, particularly in women, the poet has found it hard to distinguish nature from art as its origin."²⁵² Yet, regardless of whether women are endowed with charm by nature or nurture, the effect is universal: men are defenceless against female allure.

Even if Blandina's intention was to fully pacify Arthur merely to ensure his forgiveness of Malbecco, she still favours Arthur as well. The next morning Arthur leaves the castle strong and invigorated. Blandina, although being the mistress of a dubitable character possesses traits, like her loyalty (although not to the right person), femininity and tenderness, which make her worthier than her lord. Even in the romance world, she is forgiven: by all means Arthur cherished tender feelings towards her. Probably his enjoyment of her caresses makes him forgive her: even when Turpine turns against him again, he only punishes the evil knight, not his lady. She is exempted.

Mirabella's story, fractured into cantos vi, vii and viii in Book VI is close to Briana's and Blandina's in its moral, showing sinning women who are able to reform and repent. In displaying penitence Mirabella is the most ardent, however, her sins are also the gravest. As an exception to Spenser's rule of connecting beauty to good breeding, Mirabella comes from a base family, and is "Yet deckt with wondrous giftes of natures grace." (VI.vii.28) Because of her exquisite beauty, "all men did her person much admire" (VI.vii.28), and strongly strive for her. The extreme pining has lethal consequences: due to this incurable languish, twenty-two men distress themselves to death. Seeing this utter vanity and pride, Cupid sentences Mirabella to a lengthy wandering. She cannot return until she saves the lives of as many knights as she caused the death of, in addition to which, she has to fill a leaking bottle with tears of contrition and a torn bag with her repentance (VI.viii.24). Her involuntary undertaking seems highly demanding. In the light

²⁵² Spenser, *Variorum*, VI 216

of her punishment, her encounter with Arthur is a clear signifier of her moral improvement and honest repentance: the prince attacks Mirabella's two guards, Disdain and Scorne, but Mirabella prevents their killing, saying she needs to complete her punishment, otherwise her "life will by his death haue lamentable end." (VI.viii.16) In the group of middle women, Mirabella is rather difficult to judge. Her initial stubbornness, vanity and cruelty could almost classify her as an evil woman. Yet, what saves her is Arthur's sympathy and mercy, which might be due to her resemblance to Canacee, the chaste heroine of Book VI of *Friendship*. Prior to marrying Triamond, the knight of *Friendship*, Canacee was also a woman, who attracted many men who willingly died for her. The only dissimilarity between Canacee and Mirabella is that while Canacee's suitors died in a joust, Mirabella's admirers pined themselves to death. This disparity – especially by renaissance standards – is significant, but the different judgement they entail seems exaggerated. Although Mirabella is offered salvation, and Arthur is willing to immediately restore her into society, she has to face her previous sins. She is not above any laws, no special treatment applies to her: being involved in other men's death requires repentance. She is not condemned, rather pitied, and even revered for her capability of salvation. Her plotline does not conclude with a happy ending, but she goes through moral improvement which results in clemency.

Priscilla's and Aladine's episode in VI.ii-iii displays an instance of tolerant handling of prescribed rules. As usual with Spenser, all the background information about the lovers is given after their current relationship is described. In the romance's present Priscilla's selfless and caring love towards the wounded Aladine is emphasised. We see her deep concern both in the covert forest where Calidore and Tristram come upon them and also later in Aladine's father's castle, where they find temporary shelter: "But faire Priscilla (so that Lady hight) / Would to no bed, nor take no kindly sleepe, / But by her wounded loue did watch all night, / And all the night for bitter anguish weepe, / And with

her teares his wounds did wash and steepe.” (VI.iii.10) These lines suggest the outlines of a balanced and ideal relationship. However, as the immediate danger of physical annihilation is over, the fundamental problem of their love (re-)emerges. The young couple abscond together after Priscilla’s father had proscribed their marriage because of Aladine’s lower degree. Following the unpleasant events of Priscilla’s attempted seduction and Aladine’s injury, doubts start rising in Priscilla regarding her reputation and the righteousness of her bold decision. These feelings prove to be stronger than her love: ensuring Aladine’s well-being in Aldus’s castle she opts to return to her parental home.

It seems that Priscilla has not reached that level of individuality which we can see in case of Serena or Aemylia or Amavia. She is too weak and lacks the perseverance to go along the unconventional path she embarked on. She cannot shake off the depressing weight of her determination, and finally yields to it. But despite this submission her figure still has a lot to offer, having the willpower to elope from her father’s house, which does not seem a mere hasty decision, but a choice inspired by deep love. She is liberated enough to yield to the calling of physical passion without regretting her deed. (The reader hears about Priscilla’s and Aladine’s intimacy from the dead knight’s lady, who saw them hiding and hugging: “We chaunst to come foreby a couert glade / Within a wood, whereas a Ladie gent / Sate with a knight in ioyous iolliment / Of their franke loues, free from all gealous spyes.” (VI.ii.16) The way she finds her way back to her parents is also remarkable: she neither victimises herself, nor pleads guilty, but - with Calidore - fabricates a clever lie. Calidore tells Priscilla’s father that his daughter was attacked by a knight, and he, Calidore rescued her, and as evidence they show the knight’s head (in fact the head of the knight who wanted to seduce Priscilla). The father is grateful to Calidore, and welcomes his daughter back. This episode curiously displays the ironic nature of chastity and one’s reputation: regardless of what happened in the past, if society deems one as respectable,

then the past can be erased, since what is in the depth of one's heart and mind is inaccessible. Here, in the case of Priscilla, no signs of redemption are given, however, her reputation can be fully restored. The 'moral voice' of the romance also employs this superficial perspective: no preaching is given about Priscilla's supposed lechery, disobedience and dishonesty. In real life, these tools all seem to be acceptable. Flawless purity, obedience and honesty only belong to the near-transcendental exemplary heroines.

Book VI offers another ending of Priscilla's and Aladine's passionate love. Claribell, the mother of the long lost princess, Pastorella, also chose a man of lower degree as a husband. (VI.xii.) However, in this instance the lovers persevered, and the man, Bellamour managed to live up to her expectations and social status, and - with the favourable changes of circumstance - they were united as an honourable and noble couple. Here, Bellamour's personal merits were stronger than socially prescribed rules, which he managed to reform. The fact that he made himself accepted as a lawful worthy husband, in hindsight, justified Claribell's rebellious decision, hence it is met with authorial approval.

Serena's position in the last completed part, in Book VI is definitely emphatic. Judging by her strong and dominant presence she would even be entitled to be handled similarly as Britomart, Una and Amoret, as a major Spenserian heroine. However, her character prevents her from joining the 'elite' group. While Una, Belphoebe or Britomart were able fight off temptation, Serena welcomes it. What is really uniquely different and novel in her story in comparison to the chaste, is not her propensity to conventionally deemed sin, but the lack of struggle and hesitation with which she embraces certain behavioural forms, which seemed unacceptable and unimaginable for other women. Her first appearance is emblematic in this regard: Knight Calidore comes upon Serena and her lover, Calepine embracing in a bush:

He chaunst to come whereas a iolly Knight,
In couert shade him selfe did safely rest,
To solace with his Lady in delight:
His warlike armes he had from him vndight;
For that him selfe he thought from daunger free,
And eke the Lady was full faire to see,
And courteous withal, becoming her degree. (VI.iii.20)

After the incident, Calidore apologizes to Calepine and Serena because he “Troubled had their quiet loues delight” (VI.iii.21), and starts a jolly conversation with the couple. Calepine, “His long aduentures gan to him relate” (VI.iii.22), and “The faire Serena (...) / Allur’d with myldnesse of the gentle wether, / And pleasurance of the place, the which was dight / With diuers flowres distinct with rare delight.” (VI.iii.23) What is new in this situation is not only the couple’s ease with which they handle this usually condemnable, embarrassing situation, but also the narrator’s approval of it. Not even a slight implication suggests his objection. Her name, referring to serenity, hence calmness and cheerfulness also fits into the positive ambience created around her. Leigh DeNeef²⁵³ sees Proserpina and Eurydice as Serena’s mythic analogues, which also enforces the general belief that despite her objective frailties, Serena comes across as a likeable, respectable young lady. Her archetypal story indeed resembles the afore mentioned mythic characters’ in their wanderings in an almost pastoral environment, and their misfortunes with various beasts and savage creatures.

In Spenser’s fairy world Serena’s chaste alter ego is definitely the wandering naive Florimell. The parallel sheds light on Serena’s immaturity and yet underdeveloped autonomy. Although Serena is less gullible, both she and Florimell need male protection to fend off attack – usually of a sexually abusive nature. Their apparent vulnerability generates care in virtuous men they encounter (and lust in the lewd). As Arthur, Guyon and

²⁵³ Hamilton, *Spenser Encyclopedia*, 637.

Timias protect Florimell, so does Calidore, the Salvage Man, the Hermit and Calepine look after Serena. The fact that Serena cannot be classified as one of the Spenserian chaste women is not the failure of her guarding knights, but the result of her own decision. The knights are successful in saving her from unwanted, intrusive interaction, and the choice to fully devote herself to her beloved knight, Calepine is entirely hers.

Serena's uniqueness in terms of her lack of moral struggle has already been highlighted. However, the social facet of this matter still requires some consideration. The romance intriguingly captures the duality and division between Serena's inner good conscious and her suffering caused by a general social condemnation of her actions and behaviour. McManus's sensitive close reading of the romance reveals a riveting interpretation of the incident when Serena is severely bitten by the Blatant Beast. According to her, Serena's incurable, deepening wound is to be associated with social shame due to her indecent behaviour.²⁵⁴ Although she is allowed to suffer lengthily, it seems that the romance (and its author) is on her side versus social condemnation. The sympathetic tone which describes her miseries evokes pity and a feeling of unjustness in us, hence we feel relief when she is cured by the Hermit. In accordance with McManus it can be stated that Serena's story is a case of independent, autonomous thinking being rewarded over old-fashioned, zealous rule-governed meaningless social norm.

The romance's lenient attitude to Serena is even more visible in the Matilde-episode. Here the fates of the two women of opposite intentions and aims are inherently intertwined. Reading the text carefully reveals to us that the language describing the pain of Serena's wound and copious bleeding (for instance "busie paines" VI.iii 28; "Sickely Dame" VI.iii 31; "So sore her sides, so much her wounds did bleede;" VI.iii. 46) evokes strong associations of childbirth, a connection that also explains the extent of social

²⁵⁴ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 201.

disapproval she received. Her anguish is suddenly eased in an oblique scene: in pain and despair, she disappears into the forest, and meanwhile the lamenting Matilde and Bruin appear. Their tragedy is that they are longing for offspring, but their fate is to remain childless. Suddenly Calepine (Serena's lover) glimpses a bear with an infant in his mouth, and bravely snatches the baby from the beast, and encouraging Matilde to raise him as if her own. When she agrees, Calepine seems hugely relieved "Right glad was Calepine to be so rid / Of his young charge" (VI.iv.38) which enforces our growing suspicion about Serena being the mother of the infant. Although the implications about Serena's childbirth and her surrender of the baby are not clear, the references are still strong enough to underpin this interpretation, and they fit smoothly with the Serena plotline. From the beginning of her story she is consistently portrayed as a woman who chose to devote herself to love which is free of commitments and responsibility, hence the role of being a mother seemed unacceptable for this kind of figure. And uniquely this decision is accepted at this point of the romance. With McManus's words "Serena actually is guilty of sexual indiscretion. Spenser's allegory, however, serves to distance her from accountability as a mother."²⁵⁵ McManus also draws attention to the enigmatic tone of the narrator, which also alleviates Serena's culpability: "[h]er maternity is rendered obliquely, the Spenserian text both pointing and obscuring her childbirth experience, both condemning and exonerating her."²⁵⁶ Taking into consideration the previous, severe, negative judgement of extramarital sexual relationships, in Serena's case the elements of forgiving, accepting and understanding by all means prevail over blame.

Juxtaposing Serena and Matilde highlights their sharp contrast: one of them wishes to remain childless, whereas the other would do anything for a baby. Also it is

²⁵⁵ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 202.

²⁵⁶ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 205.

worthy to notice that although these two women represent two extremely different principles, society conventionally condemns both of them. Serena is judged for being indecent and Matilde for not being able to bear a child. Their encounter restores the balance: Serena's disgrace is concealed and Matilde's role as a mother is fulfilled.

Apart from social condemnation the distinct stories of Matilde and Serena bear another similarity. As Serena's conscience is free of guilt, so is Matilde's. Naturally the guilt of sexuality is more serious than not being able to conceive a child, but records can be found about women being stigmatised for being barren. In opposition to this usual attitude, Matilde does not condemn herself, only her destined fate: "For th'heauens enuying our prosperitie, / Haue not vouchsaft to graunt vnto vs twaine /The gladfull blessing of posteritie." (VI.iv.31) In addition to ignoring social conventions when judging herself, another hint suggests that Matilde is a confident and autonomous character. When she accepts the baby, she decides to hide the circumstances of his "arrival" from her husband: "And with her husband vnder hand so wrought /That when that infant vnto him she brought, / She made him thinke it surely was his owne." (VI.iv.38) The reader can contemplate the nature of this lie, whether it is a white one or a badly deceiving one, or the reason behind it. It could be to avoid social judgement, not to offend Bruin's masculine confidence (VI.iv.33), or for the baby's sake to hide his dubious lineage (VI.iv.36). One primary reason cannot be chosen, and what is really important here is not for whose benefit Matilde opted to lie, but that she consciously decided that family life can be built on dishonesty.

Hellenore, the ambiguous beauty of Book III is the most difficult to make a moral judgement on. Her case is unique: she is not one of the discourteous ladies of Book VI of Courtesy, her sin is graver than that, she sins against chastity. She is culpable of lewdness, adultery and promiscuity. On this account she could be a condemnable figure in the

romance and handled as one of Duessa's assistants. Yet, she is not. Her character lacks malice and evilness and aggression. She is the young and beautiful wife of the rich but old and impotent Malbecco: "Yet he [Malbecco] lincked to a louely lasse, / Whose beauty doth her bounty far surpass." (III.ix.4) "But he is old, and withered like hay / Vnfit faire Ladies seruice to supply." (III.ix.5)

Emphasising the unfavourable circumstances, the romance provides an excuse for Hellenore's adultery, and even implicates some encouragement. In the episode in which Hellenore appears, even the dismissible act of initiating a sexual relationship is excused. Paridell, one of the guests in Malbecco's castle lusts after the young and joyful wife, and clearly indicates his intentions.

With speaking lookes, that close embassage bore,
He rou'd at her, and told his secret care:
For all that art he learned had of yore.
Ne was she ignoraunt of that lewd lore,
But in his eye his meaning wisely read. (III.ix.28)

Understanding and welcoming Paridell's erotic hints, Hellenore responds with a seemingly innocent, but suggestive act: while they are having dinner she drops her cup filled with wine onto her lap. "The guilty cup she fained to mistake, / And in her lap did shed her idle draught, /Shewing desire her inward flame to slake." (III.ix.31) Paridell's and Hellenore's emotions escalate into the hasty decision of eloping. While fleeing, the lovers set Malbecco's money on fire, which, again, alleviates Hellenore's sin by showing Malbecco plainly renouncing her in the hope of saving his wealth. Despite the highly charged attraction, once consummated, Paridell's desire vanishes. His treatment of Hellenore becomes rather disparaging, he decides to "take no keepe of her" (III.ix.38), and abandon her in the middle of a forest.

Had the Hellenore-episode ended here, it could have served as a moral example of

the humiliation and emptiness felt after surrendering to one's desire. But her plot continues, resulting in a relieving justice for her. After a short hiatus, we see Hellenore once more, this time from Malbecco's point of view, who – after ensuring his money – sets off in search of his wife. Suddenly he glimpses her heartily entertaining herself with a tribe of satyrs:

The iolly satyres full of fresh delight,
Came dauncing forth, and with them nimbly led
Faire Hellenore, with girlonds all bespred,
Whom their May-lady they had newly made:
She proud of that new honour, which they red,
And of their louely fellowship full glade,
Daunst liuely, and her face did with a Lawrell shade. (III.x.44)

Her confidence, freedom and the lack of shame and frustration turn her into one of the most enviable female characters in the entire romance. In most scenes of Bacchanalian excess, women participate reluctantly not of their own will. McManus highlights Amoret as a counterexample to Hellenore: “Unlike Amoret, who is forced to play a role in Busirane’s Petrarchan masque, Hellenore participates willingly in the antimasque dance with the satyrs.”²⁵⁷ Hellenore's skill in enjoying and celebrating life is remarkable. We have witnessed numerous respectable great heroines, who were all honourable, but their characters lacked that nonchalant vivacity, and their fates frustratingly missed completion. Hellenore is provided with both: we have seen her ability for gaiety and our last glimpse is of her satiated, celebrated and content with the satyrs. Malbecco still spying becomes a witness of her excessive nocturnal joys: Hellenore “amongst them lay, /Embraced of a *Satyre* rough and rude, /Who all the night did minde his ioyous play: / Nine times he heard him come aloft ere day.” (III.x.48) Eventually Malbecco admits that his capabilities could not be measured against the satyrs’: “not for nought his wife them loued so well.” (III.x.48)

²⁵⁷ McManus, *Reading of Women*, 261, n51

In a romance which is so obsessed with different forms and variations of blame and punishment, this episode manages to escape any contemplation on this issue. Here, merely the course of events is narrated, and moral judgement is not imposed on the reader. The general ambiance of this story, hence, is rather that of light-hearted entertainment. These stanzas radiate a peculiar kind of wit, which very rarely occurs in this romance, as if the narrator here would be able not to take himself and his characters too seriously, and handle them with a modicum of ridicule and amusement. However, it is important to note, that this episode is embedded both into the Britomart and Amoret plotlines, which offer an elaborate analysis of blame and the nature of sin. In this serious, highly philosophical environment a brief and humorous interlude facilitates to digest the moral message of the main plot. Probably because of this unessential position of this tale was it possible for a liberated unconventional character like Hellenore to remain in the plot without disapproval.

This chapter attempted to highlight some peculiarities about female sexual behaviour in *The Faerie Queene*. It can be stated that our general impression is that the prevailing conduct meets contemporary male requirements. We encounter righteous heroines who can give guidance and set example for sixteenth century women, yet we see condemnable temptresses who do the opposite. Here negative behaviour contrasts with positive examples, and makes them appear even more venerable and beautiful. These cases prove that the authorial intention of educating and moulding intertwines the romance, and that *The Faerie Queene* is a suitable channel of didactic advice. However, there is another, less conspicuous group, who do not underpin the moral message. These women have human feelings, are passionate, thus prone to err and be frail. They do not accept conventions automatically, choose wayward solutions, and are unintentionally rebellious. The most impressive achievement of these ladies is that they manage to accomplish their

goals and live atypical lives without serious authorial disapproval, and thus undermine the ethical message. It is unlikely that this silent shift in emphasis happens intentionally. It is more probable that the work veered into something, which it ardently tried to avoid, and the repressed physicality, emotions and worldliness lurking unnoticed penetrated into the romance. As Paglia summarised “*The Faerie Queene* often becomes what it condemns.”²⁵⁸ Although with this sentence, Paglia described voyeuristic scenes when the narrator apparently takes pleasure in something he planned to condemn and set as a negative example, the statement’s scope can be extended to the whole romance. Occasionally, and especially towards the end of the work, when more and more women emerge who fail to commit themselves to a totally chaste and virtuous life, we feel that control is slipping, and unintentionally gives way to human, full bodied female characters, who even manage to be more affable than their stiff and allegoric counterparts. Fletcher, in his thorough analysis of allegory, tackles the problem of major characters: “the poet controls meaning, or meanings, his hero is intended to carry. But as a result of this procedure, the poet denies true human character to that hero.”²⁵⁹ Thus are Spenser’s main female figures sexually limited and schematic. Due to the pressure mounted onto them by their virtuous (allegorical) roles, which they have to live up to, and whose righteousness they are bound to prove, in terms of their behaviour they are mostly conventional, sober, controlled, and at the very least autonomous.

Spenser’s exemplary females never manage to push through the limits of patriarchal society, but they willingly accept its rules. Hence their ethical concern always remains between safe, acceptable boundaries. “By splitting off these chips of composite

²⁵⁸ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 191.

²⁵⁹ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 37.

character, the author is able to treat them as pure, isolated, personified ideas.”²⁶⁰ On the other hand, while the author is concentrating on painting honourable pictures of great ladies, these “chippings” invisibly acquire character and life, and slowly undermine the principles of the romance. The Acrasian temptresses have already attempted this “coup,” but their immense beauty makes them too conspicuous, hence they received too much heed. They have been scrutinised and spied at constantly by male eyes, their wrongdoings cannot remain unnoticed.

The ‘middle’ females, who on the surface merely function as either additions to great women’s character (Amoret, Priscilla) or facilitators of the plot (Samient, Matilde), due to their secondary position - manage to remain unnoticed. In a work where imagery is so strong, the lack of visual description allows characters to hide in the text. They are not outstanding because they are neither ravishing, nor utterly evil. However, this non-emphatic position allow them freedom in terms of their action, which is surprising in a work that intends to fashion the ideal queen, and also serves as an epic conduct book.

Paglia wrote that “*The Faerie Queene* is didactic but also self-pleasuring.”²⁶¹ However, this duality cannot go hand in hand indefinitely. In *The Faerie Queene*, after prolonged self-control and frustration, pleasure gradually overwrites the didactic element.

Especially in Book VI, where numerous middle women emerge, the work loses its moral tenacity. Accidentally a conduct is tolerated which is in opposition to the ethos of the romance. Amavia is allowed to kill herself, Priscilla can joyfully run away with her lover, and then return home as if nothing happened, and Hellenore is given the liberating happiness she always strived for, just to mention a few instances of uncustomary

²⁶⁰ Fletcher, *Allegory*, 37.

²⁶¹ Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 190.

behaviour. These women come across as more affable and human, than the emphatic, virtuous ones. Although it is undeniable that occasionally exemplary females also reach the boundaries of good conduct, they never transgress it, whereas the episodic ladies, who did not carry the burden of being potential Elizabeth representations, were free to experiment.

Observing the two clear-cut groups of women, the main tendency is that the narrator judges the characters as if he had the conduct books in mind. Duessa, and the women of the Bower of Bliss lack Christian chastity, demureness, and possess a strong erotic drive and rampage, hence they are openly condemned. Chaste women are calm, strong, controlled and loyal, for which characteristics they are favoured. Yet, some chaste women embark on long wanderings, which are disapproved of in guidance publications. These journeys, however, are often understood as an allegory of life, and of finding one's spiritual way. Nevertheless, if the easy option of poetry is ignored, the errands can still be justified: the aim of all of these is to find a destined husband, for the sake of whom all chaste women give up their individuality.

The group of women who cause confusion, are the women in the middle. Reading their stories we see actions which clearly break the rules of good conduct. These women lie (Matilde, Blandina), sleep with men (Serena, Aemylia, Priscilla) commit adultery (Hellenore), act according to their instincts (Mirabella), lose hope and commit suicide (Amavia). However, they are either forgiven by the narrator, or are silently accepted by him. This group of women constitutes an invisible, but disruptive force of the romance.

Discerning these plotlines from a female point of view makes us recognise the pattern that while the stories regarding chaste women always remain unresolved, fallible women find completion and many are even blessed with joyful marriage.

V. Conclusion

The third chapter, 'Appearance' concentrated on the pictorial facade of the romance. In *The Faerie Queene* there is an abundance of females with a glamorous, glittering appearance. Some of these beauties are those grandiose Spenserian heroines who embody the ideal woman, and are set as desirable role models to follow. Nevertheless, the minute depiction of these chaste women is not always as innocently obvious as it first seems. In the renaissance chaste mien usually involved favourable countenance (as female saints or the Virgin Mary are always depicted as attractive females), hence to encounter these venerable and delicate women is not extraordinary. What is more unusual is the tone which occasionally colours these descriptions. The occurrence of perfect and refined bodies often creates erotic tension. As Paglia remarked, "Spenser habitually complicates even innocent exchanges by some eroticizing adjective, usually describing white flesh."²⁶² These instances of subverting sexuality with chastity are dissolved or clarified by either a sudden revelation of the shift in point of view (for instance in the case of Belphebe being spied on by Trompart instead of the narrator), or by transporting the vision onto the level of dream (for instance Arthur's vision). With this technique the slight slip of physical admiration can be rectified and excused, and grand heroines can remain immaculate and almost transcendently unattainable.

However, not all of these women of excessive pulchritude are undoubtedly virtuous. There are also enchanting temptresses whose demeanour is impeccable. In *The Faerie Queene* they centre on the luscious Bower of Bliss with Acrasia in the middle. This

²⁶² Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 181.

location is one of the most perilous of all threats, because sin and temptation is concealed with art and refinement. Nevertheless, despite the clear and articulate warning during the description of the bower, the romance seems to be charmed by it more than we would think appropriate. Women of the Bower are depicted with indulgent words, with emphasis on their irresistible beauty and tempting sexuality. But, similarly to chaste women, the direction and the tone has to change to be commensurate with the general message and moral principles of the work.

Enchantresses, because of their discernible looks, have an unequivocal position. They become part of a didactic moral story of proper behaviour. Because of their looks they trigger too much attention to allow the moral scheme of the romance to be disrupted. All of them are forced to be able to fit into the moral grid. Chaste ones have to look chaste, while even ostensibly attractive evil women have to be denounced. As we have witnessed, this can occasionally be achieved with great difficulty. Sometimes chaste women ignite erotic fantasies, and unchaste women with their voluptuous bodies are more seductive than they are supposed to be. But despite these anomalies of eroticising virtuous women and ameliorating temptresses, moral order is eventually restored. The edge is taken away from the virtuous, and retribution is taken on the vile.

As we have seen in the fourth, lengthy chapter, that between the two archetypal extremes, there is another, less easily definable, and almost invisible type of woman. Since they do not possess the typical, clear-contoured, glowing bodies of Spenserian females, they do not emerge from the romance as figures to pay much heed to. Because of their lack of glamour, these women are usually dismissed as one-dimensional and uninteresting, or even ignored. However, if they are observed in more depth and if their essence had to be defined, we see that they have much more to offer than we would assume at first sight. The behavioural pattern they represent displays something unique in the romance. These

women err, and make mistakes, yet this is not the primary reason for their individuality and peculiarity. What is exceptional here is the romance's lenience towards them. They are adulterous, wanton, suicidal, disobedient, dishonest, and never punished. They might have to face the more or less implied or uttered scolding of the narrator, but serious retaliation is eschewed. With this combination of sinning and forgiving, the romance undermines its own teaching. It wastes major effort on describing virtuous females to set them up as embodiments of the ideal woman, and even more effort to show them operating in a society full of temptation. Sometimes it is painfully difficult to see how certain women strive to preserve their purity. No less travail was invested in picturing evil temptresses' sinful conduct and the punishment for that. Yet letting 'middle' women err, questions the whole message about the nature of the appropriate female of the romance. This doubt is underscored by the cadence of women's fate. While chaste women are never given blissful satisfaction in married life, the destinies of middle women are always fulfilled. Most of them are endowed with their desired aims (Matilde with a child; Serena, Briana and Aemylia with their lovers; Samient with a successfully completed mission, Hellenore with liberated passions), and even those who did not reach their desired goal were restored to a status quo stage (as with Priscilla's social virginity), or given a dignified end (Amavia and Mordant buried together). In comparison to these stories "the Sisyphean effort required to sustain a well-tempered body,"²⁶³ and the effort of good women to meet all the requirements of proper behaviour seems futile.

With these middle women, the romance indeed becomes what it condemns. It gives way to a new kind of woman with an interesting, complex background, and the ability to make decisions, even though they are incorrect. Meanwhile, the chaste women can carry on being exemplary, and serve as examples for a potential female audience,

²⁶³ Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves*, 41.

offering models of celibate chastity and chaste marriage. Women of this group, similarly or parallel to their male counterparts, embark on grandiose, epic journeys. In opposition to the male knights who set off for a noble, public mission, the pursuit of the ladies is of a private nature: usually they have to find their husbands. Men's task is to complete the story of a country, women's, to complete their lives with a husband and offspring, thus ensuring future heroes for prospective public quests. From this generic point of view, the stories of these women, such as Una, Britomart, Florimell, Amoret, highly resemble each other. Their plots are recurring attempts to find personal bliss through completion in married life. With Frye "[t]ranslated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality."²⁶⁴ In *The Faerie Queene* this relieving fulfilment is postponed indefinitely for chaste grand Spenserian heroines. Their love stories of a similar nature all seem to be the attempts of lovers to find completion, however, none of them have the power to break free. They are all in stasis, never able to reach a fulfilling consummated love, - a futile effort resulting in unsolvable frustration.

This inability to complete chaste stories parallels the broader inability to complete this romance of virtues. As the individual stories in the work are not rounded off, so is the main plot left open. The most obvious reason for the work having been left unfinished is Spenser's sudden death. It is tempting to start speculating whether he continued the romance during the three years which passed between the publishing of Book VI and his death, and to find satisfying answers regarding whether these stanzas were lost, or simply never existed. We should not forget the existence of the two Mutabilitie Cantos, which "first appeared in the folio of 1609."²⁶⁵ Although the cosmological ambiance of these

²⁶⁴ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 192.

²⁶⁵ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1231.

cantos is disparate from the general tone of the first six books, these parts seem to be cantos vi and vii of one of the consecutive books. But even with the acceptance of these cantos as inherent parts of the romance, *The Faerie Queene*'s fragmentary nature cannot be doubted. The fact that between 1596 and 1599 nothing substantial was added to the original plot makes us suppose that the author had no great urge to finish this piece. According to Frye, this incoherence is natural with this genre. The undertaking is usually so challenging and grandiose that the author cannot keep up with his transcendently strong heroes, and loses his incentive to finish.

What happened in the case of *The Faerie Queene* was that the author had a series of stories in mind through which he intended to display different virtues via the actions of grand and virtuous heroes and heroines. The exemplary lives of these characters should have served as fictional conduct books. The key figure who was going to give coherence to the work was Gloriana, the Fairy Queen. However, her figure grew larger and more complicated than expected. What kind of an end should have been chosen for Gloriana? Chaste marriage with Arthur or the continuation of her celibacy? The latter seemed dissatisfactory for Spenser, while the former might have seemed sacrilegious or at least incongruous with her character. (It would be vexing to imagine Gloriana on the side of Arthur as his spouse, giving birth to his offspring.) Despite this conundrum, the core predicament of the romance lies not in the Gloriana plotline. Its incompleteness is a consequence of and reflection on the stumble of the main theory of the romance behind the scenes. The work gradually shifts towards an ambience which it tries to deny and suppress. The intended message of conduct books fades, and gives way to a more worldly, more lenient and humane feeling. However, the author never yields completely, attempting to maintain the strict façade of prescribed rules, but, with lesser and lesser conviction. The emerging figures of women of "no importance" naturally manage to have their stories

completed, whereas women of much prestige fail to find their way, getting lost in the jungle of good conduct. They have too much pressure to carry: they have to display impeccable conduct both on the private and public level. This unbearable weight drowns the romance. Had *The Faerie Queene* remained a mere courtesy work in honour of the queen, it might have survived the high demand, and remained a lifeless cliché. But since it gained more life and individuality than a pure didactic dedicatory piece, the usage of courtly patterns are not enough and too transparent. On the other hand, the work is not vigorous enough to totally smash through the rules of conventions and become a work of fresh thought and honesty. It embarks on that path but after a few steps it often becomes petrified of the direction and turns back to didacticism.

Occasionally grandiose heroines got on the verge of freedom, but in their case it was unacceptable, hence had to be obstructed. The inner struggle of the romance is in parallel with Belpheobe's fate: she vows chastity (probably not out of external pressure, but of her own will), then she falls in love with Timias, but without being able to or wanting to recognise these feelings, she suppresses the affection. The reason for this suppression is her customary celibacy, the supposed authoritative correctness. The romance behaves in the same way: it suppresses natural, human feelings in supposition of their inappropriateness. The whole romance is a struggle between two forces: the tradition, which the author really wants to follow, and his human self, which he wants to harness and suppress, but whose natural tone keeps surfacing. Probably the author himself was not even aware of this freshness. He probably deemed it as a defective incapability of completing his masterpiece.

This freshness and unconventionality can be fathomed in the sketchy stories of middle women. Spenser's natural, unaffected voice and epic talent could emerge. The occurrence of middle women in the romance world is not coincidental. Through them

elements of life filters into the romance, and shows a facet of reality behind the rigid rules of society and conduct books. Middle women also paint an ironic picture of sixteenth century society: through Priscilla we see that virginity is not a physical, but a social constrain, through Matilde we see that women lie to their husbands for their prospective long term happiness, through Aemylia that love is not a constant emotion, but an undulating one. Through every story of middle women in the romance we could see something which must have been condemnable according to a rigid sixteenth century mind, but which for us modern readers comes across as commonsense behaviour. And the natural and accidental tone of these plotlines makes us suspect that these stories were not merely inventions, but examples from everyday life. Through the appearance of these everyday women in the romance, we can see the human side of the renaissance, and from a literary point of view the rise of the modern heroine.

By now a double standard in the romance can be grasped. To grandiose visible heroines the official rules apply – which prove to be impossible to live with, whereas, the unimportant women are measured against the rules of everyday common sense. And – very importantly – these women are still classified as acceptable, or even virtuous. The narrator slightly scolding them rarely passes serious judgement. The evidence of the accepted and implied virtuousness of middle women is the condemnation and destruction of evil ones. They can be beautiful and tempting, however, their serious crimes never remain unpunished. Had the middle women been deemed unchaste – similarly to evil ones – they would have had to face retribution. The main moral dilemma of the romance is neither the deserved punishment of the evil, nor the praise of the chaste, but the human, benevolent errors of the middle ones. The conduct books say they shall be punished, on the other hand common sense says the opposite- Spenser cannot go against human feeling and common sense, but with this attitude, with giving happiness to fallible women, who do not even

resent their sins, who do not even see their own actions as sinful, he has sacrificed his romance.

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